



# Sermon Tidbits

OCTOBER 5, 2016

## Parashat Vayelech – Shabbat Shuvah

### Tomorrow's Picture – Remembering Shimon Peres

Return O' Israel (Hosea 14:2)

שובה ישראל (הושע יד:ב)

Last Friday, leaders from around the world gathered to pay tribute to former Israeli prime minister and president, Shimon Peres, the last surviving founding father of the Jewish state. Peres, in his later years, was universally beloved, restoring the luster of the mostly symbolic Israeli presidency, but also serving as a tireless advocate for not only a strong Jewish state, but one that lived in peace and harmony with its neighbors. Israelis from across the political spectrum embraced him due to his dignity and his stature, but also the respect that one earns from standing by his principles, even in the face of public political defeat. Even those that disagreed with him—and many did so vehemently—respected and admired the pioneer of the Israeli defense establishment and political giant. A clever, articulate public figure, perhaps most amazing about Peres was his tireless persistence, his devotion to his country and his people, and his refusal to retire from a life of meaning, devotion and dedication. After his death, the [New York Times shared some of Peres' best quotes](#). One has particular meaning for us as we gather in prayer on Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He said, “Sometimes people ask me, ‘What is the greatest achievement you have reached in your lifetime or that you will reach in the future?’ So I reply that there was a great painter named Mordecai Ardon, who was asked which picture was the most beautiful he had ever painted. Ardon replied, ‘The picture I will paint tomorrow.’ That is also my answer.”

This quote is also a core element of what *teshuvah* means. The Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called “Shabbat Shuvah” after the first word of the Haftarah—“*Shuvah Yisrael*” - “Return O’ Israel”—in which the prophet Hosea exhorts the Jewish people to repent from their sinful ways and return to a life of godliness and spirituality. We define *teshuvah*, from the root of the word “*lashuv*”—“to return,” as a form of repentance. It is the process of looking back at our actions over the past year or more, and “returning” from our sinful ways, committing ourselves to being better people. Yet, there is also a forward-looking aspect to the process of *teshuvah*. Maimonides (*Laws of Repentance* 2:3) notes that an essential element of repentance is the commitment to change in the future. Inherent in this process of repentance is the desire to change; to grow from our mistakes, and to move forward. Maimonides, in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (III:36) also writes that, “The belief in *teshuvah*, however, leads [a person] to improvement, to come to a state that is better, nearer to perfection, than that which he obtained before he sinned. That is why the Torah prescribes many actions that are meant to establish this correct and very useful principle of *teshuvah*.”

This was the greatness of Shimon Peres. He lived his life dedicated to his country and his people, always looking forward, finding opportunities for growth and development. In another New York Times article about Peres' legacy, [Isabel Kirschner writes](#) about how Peres reached out to Micah Goodman, an American-Israeli philosopher, to discuss Mr. Goodman's Hebrew best-seller, *The Secrets of the Guide for the Perplexed*. “I find myself in his apartment in Tel Aviv,” Mr. Goodman recalled. “He is wearing his jeans. He wants to understand Maimonides. He told me that before he goes to sleep he thinks to himself, ‘Did I bring more good to the world today, or bad?’ He kept a balance sheet. He was like a 16-year-old idealist. At 93.” Shimon Peres paved a path that we too must follow. He taught us that you can never be too old to grow and change. He taught us that you can channel your idealism to make your country and people great. He taught us that one is never too old to work towards peace and build the Jewish state. Ultimately, he taught us that our greatest picture must be the one that we will paint tomorrow. ■

## The Power of Our Children's Experiences

Assemble the people (Deuteronomy 31:12)

הקהל את העם (דברים לא:יב)

In the penultimate commandment in the Torah, Moses relates the mitzvah called *Hakhel*—"Gathering." Once every seven years, after the Sabbatical year, we are instructed to, "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and the stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law." (31:12) *Sefer Hachinuch* (commandment 612) describes an elaborate ceremony in which the Jewish monarch reads several sections from the book of Deuteronomy to the entire nation from a specially constructed platform in the Temple. Commentators note that the Torah specifically commands that we also bring "little ones"—our children. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria in the Talmud (*Chagigah* 3a) explains that parents were obligated to bring their children, "In order to give reward to [the parents] that brought them." Yet, this only begs the question: why bring young children to a public ceremony, which they probably cannot understand nor appreciate. Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, who was known as the Alter of Kelm (see *Chochmah U'mussar* vol. 1, 75) explains that, "there is no greater reward for parents than raising and educating their children [to a life of Judaism and spirituality]. While they may not understand the Torah reading itself, the experience of attending a massive public spectacle would remain etched in their hearts, and would pave a path for their future education." The Torah commands us to bring our children to the ceremony to convey the importance of experiential education. The values that shape our priorities in life often come not from book learning, but from powerful and moving experiences that affect our children's growth and development.

During his [address to the United Nations General Assembly](#) in New York late last month, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the life experiences of too many Palestinian children. "I want you to imagine a day in the life of a 13-year-old Palestinian boy, I'll call him Ali. Ali wakes up before school; he goes to practice with a soccer team named after Dalal Mughrabi, a Palestinian terrorist responsible for the murder of a busload of 37 Israelis. At school, Ali attends an event sponsored by the Palestinian Ministry of Education honoring Baha Alyan, who last year murdered three Israeli civilians. On his walk home, Ali looks up at a towering statue erected just a few weeks ago by the Palestinian Authority to honor Abu Sukar, who detonated a bomb in the center of Jerusalem, killing 15 Israelis. When Ali gets home, he turns on the TV and sees an interview with a senior Palestinian official, Jibril Rajoub, who says that if he had a nuclear bomb, he'd detonate it over Israel that very day. Ali then turns on the radio and he hears President Abbas's adviser, Sultan Abu al-Einein, urging Palestinians, 'to slit the throats of Israelis wherever you find them.' Ali checks his Facebook and he sees a recent post by President Abbas's Fatah Party calling the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics a 'heroic act'...Over dinner, Ali asks his mother what would happen if he killed a Jew and went to an Israeli prison? Here's what she tells him. She tells him he'd be paid thousands of dollars each month by the Palestinian Authority. In fact, she tells him, the more Jews he would kill, the more money he'd get. Oh, and when he gets out of prison, Ali would be guaranteed a job with the Palestinian Authority. All this is real. It happens every day, all the time. Sadly, Ali represents hundreds of thousands of Palestinian children who are indoctrinated with hate every moment, every hour. This is child abuse."

The commandment of *Hakhel* reminds us of the power of experiential education, and how much children absorb from powerful life experiences. We understand this idea inherently, and we exert great effort and energy to give our children powerful, positive experiences in life. Sadly, the Palestinians also recognize this principle, but have filled their children's experiences with hatred and incitement. In order for peace to become a real possibility in the Middle East, Palestinian culture must abandon its infatuation with terrorism and murder, and take steps to ensure that Ali experiences not hate and incitement, but the power of coexistence and mutual respect. ■

---

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to [synagogue@aipac.org](mailto:synagogue@aipac.org).