



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 9, 2017

Parashat Vayechi

Sharing the Burden

Deal kindly and truly with me (Genesis 47:29)

ועשית עמדי חסר ואמת (בראשית מז:כט)

In early December, U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Allan E. Brown [died from wounds](#) suffered in mid-November in a suicide attack at the Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan. Two other soldiers and two American contractors were also killed in the attack which took place on the base as Americans were starting a 5K race in honor of Veterans Day. Last week in Israel, in a small home in the sleepy village of Nov in the Golan Heights, Maj. Hagai Ben Ari, [died at the age of 31](#) after two and a half years in a coma from wounds he suffered during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge in Gaza. Although he was on leave from the Army at the time of Operation Protective Edge, Ben Ari left behind a wife and three children to lead his unit. Unfortunately, he was shot by a sniper during an engagement in Khan Unis in the Gaza Strip and he never regained consciousness following his injury. Both soldiers gave their lives to protect the freedom of the citizens of Israel and the United States, respectively. Additionally, both soldiers' deaths remind us of the terrible price that our countries continue to pay in the war against radical Islamic terror. Parashat Vayechi teaches us that it is incumbent upon us to share the burden of their loss, emotionally, spiritually and practically.

Parashat Vayechi serves as the source for many of the Jewish traditions associated with death and mourning. We derive the Hebrew term for funeral—“*levaya*,” from the word “*lelavot*,” which means “to accompany,” noting the important custom of accompanying the dead on their final journey before burial. The very practice of a funeral procession so prevalent today recalls the actions of Joseph and his brothers, whose accompaniment of their father’s body for burial to the Land of Canaan made a significant impression upon the inhabitants of the Land, (see 50:11) and bringing great honor to Jacob. Commenting on Jacob’s request to Joseph that the son deal with him “kindly and truly” (47:29)—literally meaning “with kindness with truth”—the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 59) wonders, “Is there such a thing as ‘kindness with falsehood’ that Jacob would have to ask for ‘kindness with truth?’ This can be answered with a popular saying among the people: ‘If your friend’s son dies, share with him in the burden and help him in his time of need by sharing his pain and carrying the bier to the grave... And if your friend dies, remove every other obligation to assist him, knowing that there will be no one to repay you for this kindness.’ We can only perform true kindness when we assist others without expecting anything in return, which is why Judaism calls the great mitzvah of preparing and burying the dead “*chessed shel emet*”—true kindness and the most ideal form of a mitzvah.

When the Midrash exhorts us “share in the pain” when our friend’s child dies, we must see this teaching as a challenge: Did we even know about the bombing in Afghanistan, and hear about the soldiers killed in November? Have we grown indifferent to the loss of U.S. soldiers stationed around the world? And, while we of course are aware of the danger of Hamas in Gaza and the heavy cost of Operation Protective Edge, very few—if any of us—knew that a soldier lay wounded and unconscious for more than two years in his home, and passed away earlier this month. Jacob reminds us that we must share the burden of these losses in three important ways. Emotionally, we must mourn their deaths, and appreciate the sacrifices that they and their families made on behalf of the American people and the people of Israel. Spiritually, we must pray for their souls, and ask God to bring them and their family’s eternal peace. But we can also bear in the burden in a practical way as well. Not everyone can enlist, but we all must do our part to protect the freedoms we hold so dear. Sharing the burden means getting involved in ways that are meaningful to each of us—supporting American soldiers here at home or working and speaking out to ensure that Israeli soldiers continue to have the support, training and materials that they need to protect their country.

The greatest way to honor the lives of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf is to continue their holy work, and share the burden of fighting for and protecting the freedoms that the people of Israel and the United States enjoy each day. ■

What Unites Us

Gather yourselves together (Genesis 49:1)

האספו (בראשית מט:א)

Four years ago, President Barack Obama [called his inauguration](#) “a symbol of democracy and a reminder that we’re all in this together.” On Friday, January 20th, the world will once again turn its attention to Washington, D.C. for the inauguration of President-Elect Donald Trump, who will become America’s forty-fifth president. While every inauguration serves as a sterling reminder of the power and strength of our democracy, this is especially true when the incoming president represents a different political party than the sitting president, as will happen this year. People from around the world will witness as a Democratic president peacefully transfer the reins of power to an incoming Republican after a bitter election. We willingly transfer control of our government because we share the common values of freedom, justice and equality, and we recognize that only when we work together towards these goals do we achieve the ideals upon which our country was founded.

At the end of his life, our forefather Jacob wished to instill precisely this value of working together in his children. Sensing that his life was close to reaching its end, he gathered all of his sons to offer each one a specific blessing and message. Before he does so he tells them, “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the end of days.” (49:1) Why did he tell his sons to “gather yourselves together?” According to the Midrash, Jacob was not simply assembling his sons. Rather, he was also sending them a critical message. Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky, a leading figure of American Jewry in the 20th century, explained that Jacob did not believe that the Jewish people should exist as one unit without differences of opinion. Rather, he expected them to represent twelve parts working together to form one nation. By giving each son a special and unique blessing, he demonstrated that while each individual would think differently, and his sons would inevitably disagree, each son was also expected to be a part of a greater whole, respecting the positions the other sons as well.

As strong supporters of Israel, we understand that while we often disagree with one-another within our communities and even within our families about political issues, America’s support for Israel transcends partisan politics. When it comes to strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship, our work relies upon the support of both political parties, and we can and must come together regarding our support for a strong Jewish state. In fact, support for Israel has been one of the few issues that enjoys the backing of politicians from both parties. Last week, as Congress opened a new session, elected representatives from both parties joined together to back a resolution objecting to the recent U.N. resolution that was unfairly critical of Israel. The House of Representatives passed this resolution introduced by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY) with an overwhelming 342-80 bipartisan vote. This strong vote puts Democrats and Republicans alike on the record in rejection of this one-sided, anti-Israel action. It reaffirms America's longstanding policy that imposed solutions—whether at the U.N., at the Paris conference, or elsewhere—hurt the chances of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Not only was the Royce-Engel resolution among the first votes of the new Congress, but it was also the first Israel-related vote for more than 10% of the House, who took their seats only a few days before the vote.

In his concession speech after losing to General Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, Adlai Stevenson famously said, “That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties... We vote as many. But we pray as one. With a united people, with faith in democracy, with common concern for others less fortunate around the globe, we shall move forward with God’s guidance toward the time when his children shall grow in freedom and dignity in a world at peace.” His words cannot be more appropriate this week. Just as the ideal of bipartisanship is based upon the power of working together, we similarly recognize that when we focus on what unites us in America, we demonstrate the power of our freedom and democracy to bring prosperity to the world. ■

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