



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayigash

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Vayigash

Torah, Cuba, Cigars and Cops



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What is the connection between the murder of two police officers in Brooklyn, Cuban cigars and Torah?

The solution to differences.

In this week’s Torah reading, the family of Israel is about to leave the illuminated spirituality of their homeland for Egypt. And nothing could be more diametrically opposed – spiritually, philosophically, ideologically – than the light of Israel and the ungodly darkness of Egypt.

How to deal with the darkness?

- 1) By *preempting* the darkness and never allowing it to become a staple.
- 2) By establishing lighthouses *before* we begin to traverse the stormy seas of life.

This is how the police and the NYC mayor, and the United States and Cuba may bridge their differences – by going to a place that precedes their differences.

And this is how we may do the same with the discrepancies in our own lives.

TORAH, CUBA, CIGARS AND COPS

1. Cigar Aficionado (Joke)

A Charlotte, North Carolina, man, having purchased a box of twenty-four rare and very expensive cigars, insured them against ... fire. Within a month, having smoked his entire stockpile of these fabulous cigars, and having yet to make a single premium payment on the policy, the man filed a claim against the insurance company.

In his claim, the man stated that he had lost the cigars in "a series of small fires." The insurance company refused to pay, citing the obvious reason: that the man had consumed the cigars in a normal fashion.

The man sued and won. In delivering his ruling, the judge stated that the man held a policy from the company which warranted that the cigars were insurable. The company had also guaranteed that it would insure the cigars against fire, without defining what it considered to be "unacceptable fire," and so, the company was obligated to compensate the insured for his loss.

Rather than endure a lengthy and costly appeal process, the insurance company accepted the judge's ruling and paid the man \$15,000 for the rare cigars he had lost in "the fires."

However, shortly after the man cashed his check, the insurance company had him arrested on twenty-four counts of arson. With his very own insurance claim and testimony from the previous case used as evidence against him, the man was convicted of intentionally burning the rare cigars and sentenced to twenty-four consecutive one-year prison terms.

2. Cigars and Cops

The recent news has got me thinking about cigars, specifically Cuban cigars. For the past half a century or so, the United States has placed a trade embargo upon Cuba, banning all import and export between the two countries. The Cuban cigar has not legally crossed into American soil since the times of President John F. Kennedy.

Now I know it is Shabbat, so why do I bring this up? Well, from everything we can learn a lesson in serving our Creator. So let us consider what spiritual lesson the cigar holds for us. And we will, in due time – I promise.

Another current events issue, percolating for some time, has over the past week reached a tragic head. Last Shabbat, in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, an African-American man from Maryland walked up to two police officers as they were sitting in their patrol car and shot them execution style. He then ran into a nearby subway station and turned the gun on himself.

This double murder of law enforcement officers has come on the heels of the two high-profile deaths resulting in police action, that of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. From the killer's social media messages, it is clear that this was the primary catalyst for the murders.

The man was mentally unstable, surely, but there are many people that are mentally ill who do not murder policemen. There is always a cause to every effect.

To exasperate matters, the chief executive of New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio, who ran his political campaign on the promise of police reform, has further stoked the fires. And now, based on certain statements he has made in the wake of anti-police demonstrations, many of New York's finest see the mayor – their boss – as their enemy.

This mistrust was on full display in the hospital after the policemen were killed. A group of police officers turned their back in protest on Mr. de Blasio and Police Commissioner William J. Bratton as they were walking by – the animosity was plain to see. And the tensions have only escalated since (though some are trying to minimize the issues).

3. Differences In Belief

The root of the problem is the differences in belief.

The rift of 50 years between the United States and Cuba, as well as the current chasm between law enforcement and large swaths of people they serve and protect, both boil down to fundamental differences in philosophy and life outlook. (For that matter, all discords come down to this fundamental principle – that differences in outlook will sooner or later lead to differences in action.)

One doesn't need to be a rocket science to understand that nothing can justify the brutal murders of two innocent cops – who were there to protect the citizens of the city. No grievance can vindicate such criminal behavior. And there is also no doubt that though the murders were perpetrated by one individual, others contributed by creating a climate of hatred to the police, even calling for “kill the cops.” No decent society should allow for such incitement.

But beyond the outcry against these senseless killings, and the empathy we extend to the family of the two policemen, the entire story compels us to address the larger issue: How to overcome distrust of individuals, communities or nations?

When dealing with complicated differences, it is not easy to render one side correct over the other. On this holy Shabbat morning, our purpose to attempt to find a solution to overcoming fundamental differences in ideology and philosophy by delving into and understanding the timeless pages of the Torah.

All things, especially the providential timing of current events, help us understand and optimize our relationship with our Creator and our fellow creations. The relations between the police and the minority classes, between the United States and Cuba, are an opportunity for us to ask fundamental questions.

4. Contradiction in Terms

If you think about it, each one of us is living a life that is a contradiction in terms. On one hand, the world we live in is so very dark and so very cold, with hate, cynicism and fragmentation everywhere you look and some places you don't. But, on the other hand, we are creatures of light and hope, constantly desiring something beyond, yearning for a utopian unity, believing that somehow, someday, this world may be warmed and illuminated, and the dark and cold be banished forever.

But *how*? This question is particularly apt this week as we bask in the Chanukah afterglow. In the darkness of winter, the way we light up the night is by igniting menorahs in our lives. But now that Chanukah is over and we have packed up our menorahs until next year, the question is: *How* can we light the world?

At the risk of getting overly obtuse, on a certain level, each of our lives is like a battle between the United States and Cuba, between law enforcement and the liberal-minded. Perhaps if we find clarity in our personal contradictions, we may find clarity in national and even global contradictions as well.

Fortunately we have a Torah that, when applied, provides fundamental answers.

And everything is more enjoyable with a cigar.

5. How to Light a Cigar?

If it's your thing, cigars can be very delightful. But lighting them? A nightmare. Unlike a candlewick or cigarette, a cigar is a different beast altogether.

The Cigar Aficionado compares lighting a cigar to toasting a marshmallow over a campfire - "bring it to the fire, do not bring the fire to it." To get a little philosophical: when one lights a candlewick, the wick exists and then the fire is put to it; but when one lights a cigar, the fire exists and the cigar is put to the fire.

True, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. But, as I promised, a lesson in serving our Creator can be derived from all things – even from a cigar. So perhaps a cigar could be a lesson in learning how to light up our lives even once Chanukah is over.

6. Parshat Vayigash

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vayigash* – speaks of Jacob and his family's migration from the land of Canaan down to Egypt. Before their descent into Egypt, Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to prepare for their arrival.

Israel's descent into Egypt sparked the biggest clash of philosophies the world had ever seen. Just to put this into context:

Jacob and his family, the family of Israel, were living in the Promised Land, then called the land of Canaan. Providential circumstances – namely a famine everywhere but Egypt and the fact that Joseph, Jacob's son, rose to the head of Pharaoh's government – conspired to propel Jacob and his family down into Egypt, the pits of impurity, and away from the pure light of their homeland.

The family of Israel, our family, was about to go into a hell like no other, one that would see the Hitler of that time bathing in the blood of Jewish children, and Jewish bodies used as filler for the walls of Egypt's construction projects. This was a hell that would last for 210 years and Jacob was not naïve to this coming darkness. More than anything, Jacob was aware of the spiritual challenges ahead, the attacks on Jewish identity and on the Jewish soul.

One could imagine the cloud over his heart as he decided to leave the spiritual light and warmth of his homeland for the ungodly darkness of Egypt. Nothing could be more distant – spiritually, philosophically, ideologically – than Israel and Egypt.

What did Jacob do? Jacob preempted the ungodly darkness with the divine light. He sent Judah ahead to prepare for their arrival, as the Torah relates:

He sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, to direct him to Goshen, and [then] they came to the land of Goshen.¹

7. The Midrashim

Midrash Rabba² and Midrash Tanchuma³ expound upon this verse to teach that Jacob sent Judah to set up an academy of divine wisdom, a Torah University, in the city of Goshen. Judah was to do this so that, when the Jewish people would arrive in the darkness of Egypt, they would already have a beacon of light.

In describing why Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to Egypt, the Torah here uses an interesting verb, *l'horot*, which means “to direct/instruct/guide.” Jacob foresaw how lost the Jewish people would become in the Egyptian slavery, therefore, he established the guiding light before they would even descend into the confusing spiritual maze of Egypt.

The word Torah comes from the same root as the verb *l'horot*. Its basis is the noun *hora'ah*, meaning “instruction/guide” – for the Torah is a guide that shows the way, a practical guide how to live our day-to-day lives.⁴ By establishing a Torah school first, Jacob was establishing a lighthouse in the dark and stormy oceans of Egypt.

The Midrash Lekach Tov reads the word *l'horot* as *l'orot*, meaning “to illuminate.” The Hebrew *l'orot* – composed of the letters *lamed*, *hey*, *vov*, *resh*, *vov*, and *tof* – has the numerical value (*gematria*) of 613.

¹ Genesis 46:28.

² Vayigash 95:2.

³ Vayigash 11.

⁴ See Radak to Tehillim 19:8; Zohar III, p. 53b; et al.

There are 613 commandments/mitzvot in the Torah. This teaches us that there was a “house of instruction” in the land of Goshen wherein our forefathers studied the wisdom of the Torah even before it was given.

Why couldn't Jacob establish the house of learning once he arrived with his family? Why did Jacob feel it necessary to establish the lighthouse of divine wisdom before the Israelites came to the darkness of Egypt?

8. Two Examples from Jewish History⁵ (Optional)

The answer becomes obvious when we consider two other examples in Jewish history – the Babylonian exile and the great migration of Jews to the New World.

When the Babylonians first attacked Israel in 434 BCE, they took away 10,000 of the best and the brightest with them. That seemed like a disaster at the time, but later, when the mass exile took place and the entire Jewish nation arrived in Babylon, it turned out to be a blessing. Why? Because a Jewish infrastructure was already in place. Yeshivas had been established; there was a kosher butcher and a *mikveh*. Jewish life could continue, and as a result, we see hardly any assimilation during the Babylonian exile.⁶

But, if we jump ahead 2,500 years to the Jewish migration to America, we see how different it was. Starting at around 1882, millions of Jews who were fleeing from persecution in Czarist Russia started coming to the New World, but they didn't find yeshivas and synagogues there. And what was the consequence? The single greatest mass assimilation of Jews in history.

Therefore, this turn of events in Babylon proved to be a tremendously positive thing. It was a great example of God putting the cure before the disease, which we see over and over in Jewish history.

⁵ Crash Course in Jewish History by Rabbi Ken Spiro, p. 124.

⁶ Gittin 88a and Sanhedrin 38a.

9. Exile and Reality

If we are in exile and have to create freedom once there, then freedom is highly improbable, if not downright impossible. If our realities are darkness and then we try to create light, it is so hard. But if our reality is light, then even when we come to darkness, sooner or later our light will prevail.

The key is to create and establish the light before darkness becomes the norm. Then, all we have to do is find that light and then we can remove the darkness. Jacob said: "Our reality is light and warmth; we have to go to Egypt to remove its darkness with our reality."

If, before we enter exile, we have established homes of freedom, then it's only a matter of time before the exile itself is transformed into freedom.

And this lesson we learn from the Cuban cigar. A candlewick, or even a cigarette, is ignited by lighting a fire and taking it to the wick or cigarette. But, if we were to take a lighter or match to a cigar, the cigar would probably burn on one side and then go out.

Rather, to light a cigar, we have to bring the cigar tip into the vicinity of the fire and slowly rotate it over the flame, not quite touching the flame but toasting it with its heat. As the cigar slowly comes to the fire, it is ignited by it.

This is what Jacob has taught us – that (even in dark Egypt) the fire, the light, is the reality and everything else comes to be ignited by it.

Perhaps this is a lesson that we could have learned even without the lifting of the U.S. embargo on Cuba. But it is a lesson that is so much classier with a cigar dangling from the lip.

10. Smoke and Prayer (Joke)

Two young rabbis from different congregations were old friends who shared a great fondness for cigars. Once each year, when they had a chance to visit, they would pray together and, of course, light up.

Eventually, however, they became concerned that there might be some sin in their habit, and they each resolved to ask their respective superiors for guidance. When they met again, one was puffing away.

“But the head of my school told me it was a sin,” protested the other.

“What did you ask him?” said the first.

“I asked him if it was all right to smoke during evening prayer, and he said that I couldn’t.”

“Well,” said his friend as he blew a perfect smoke ring into the air, “I asked my superior if it was alright to pray during our evening smoke, and he said it was just fine!”

11. A Question of Precedence (Conclusion)

The question is: What is our precedence?

The problem with de Blasio and his relationship with the police, and the relations with the US and Cuba is that it began wrong – both sides do not see themselves as having the same fundamental foundation as the other; they have two different foundations and therefore two opposing visions.

The only way to resolve the problem is to go to the root: we must go dig deep and hard to a place *before* differences, to a place with one shared precedence.

Once there already is a battle between light and dark, we have in some way already lost. The goal is to preempt the dark by first establishing the reality of light.

This is the solution to all the world's problems – literally! In every philosophical difference, the solution is to go back to a place that precedes that difference. The challenge, of course, is the desire for both parties to go there (and usually one or both do not have the incentive to do so), and for that both sides need humility.

As the Torah demonstrates, the solution is there. Whether we decide to implement it is up to us.

Shabbat Shalom!

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