



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Emor

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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April 27, 2013

Emor

**After a Terrorist Attack: What  
Do We Teach Our Children?**



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

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What Do We Teach Our Children?

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## ABSTRACT

In the wake of the terror attack at the Boston Marathon, a week ago today we witnessed the spectacular news that the two perpetrators had been captured after a chase and shoot-out that captivated the nation. One of the two, Tamerlan, age 26, died in the process, but his younger brother Dzhokhar – only 19 years old – survived. He has since admitted his role in the cold-blooded planting of two bombs that killed three and wounded 260. We now wait to learn his motivation for this attack, though we know that he was a radical Islamist who identified with Chechnya, a Russian republic.

But the greater question is: What do we take away from this?

As we read with shock that a 19-year-old boy, who was an American citizen and not a victim of any kind of oppression, would stage an attack on innocent people – planning to kill or maim as many as possible – we no doubt react with anger. But even if this boy is prosecuted to the full extent of the law and given the death penalty, will that close this chapter in our consciousness?

And what will we teach our children about an event such as this?

It just so happens that education is the subject of this week’s Torah reading, as is *mesirat nefesh*, the mandate to sacrifice one’s life for God.

This sermon examines the important subject of educating with love, of instilling in our children a culture of life – which is Judaism – and of the importance of healing the world and not harming it.

Along the way, this sermon also makes a connection to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (and *Lag B’Omer* which we celebrate tonight) and how this famous author of the Zohar had to learn the vital lesson above.

## **AFTER A TERRORIST ATTACK: WHAT DO WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN?**

### **1. Teach Your Children Well (Optional)**

Anybody here remember the Crosby, Still & Nash song from the Seventies: *Teach Your Children Well* ?

You, who are on the road must have a code that you can live by.

And so become yourself because the past is just a good bye.

Teach your children well, their father's hell did slowly go by...

The writing of this song was inspired by a famous Diane Arbus photograph: *Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park*.<sup>1</sup>

I was reminded of this song and its genesis when pondering the events of the past week and the teaching of this week's Torah reading.

### **2. Terror in Boston**

In the wake of the terror attack at the Boston Marathon, a week ago today we witnessed the spectacular news that the two perpetrators – Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev – had been captured after a chase and shoot-out that captivated the nation.

One of the two, Tamerlan, age 26, died in the process, but his younger brother Dzhokhar – only 19 years old – survived. He has since admitted his role in the cold-blooded planting of two bombs that killed three and wounded 260.

We now wait to learn his motivation for this attack, though we know that he was a radical Islamist who identified with Chechnya, a Russian republic.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach\\_Your\\_Children](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teach_Your_Children)

But the greater question is:

What do we take away from this?

As we read with shock that a 19-year-old boy, who was an American citizen and not a victim of any kind of oppression, would stage an attack on innocent people – planning to maim as many as possible – we no doubt react with anger. But even if this boy is prosecuted to the full extent of the law and given the death penalty, will that close this chapter in our consciousness?

And what will we teach our children about an event such as this?

### 3. Parshat Emor

It just so happens that education is the subject of this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Emor* – which begins with the words: "Speak (*emor*) to the priests, the sons of Aharon and tell them..."<sup>2</sup>

This command is interpreted by the Talmudic Sages as an obligation to educate. The redundancy – "speak" and "tell them" – informs us "to caution" the adults how they educate the children.<sup>3</sup>

Now, the Hebrew word for "caution" – *lihazhir* – shares the same root as the word *zohar*, meaning "radiance." Also the word *emor*, meaning "speak" is special – it means to speak softly, kindly.<sup>4</sup>

This conveys a fundamental lesson about education, especially religious education. We must speak softly and kindly to our children and students, educate them about life's dangers – such as terrorism – but do so in a way that radiates the beauties of life.

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 21:1.

<sup>3</sup> Talmud *Yevamot* 114a. Cited in Rashi's opening commentary to this week's portion.

<sup>4</sup> Mechilta, Rashi Yisro 19:3.

#### 4. The Importance of Discipline

Of course, discipline is a most necessary component in education. An unshaped and impressionable child needs direction and guidance to grow into a healthy and virtuous adult.

Yet, how often have we witnessed – and how many of us have been hurt if not damaged – by discipline devoid of love?

Especially in the religious world, how many of us have been affected by dogmatic, fear-driven discipline?!

We have witnessed the devastating psychological effects of many people growing up in homes and schools where they were indoctrinated with fear and guilt, and threatened with the wrath of God.

#### 5. Educating with Love

But the Torah clearly tells us – indeed, it actually commands us – to educate our children with radiance and love. Discipline is necessary, but alone it squelches the little seedling so that it grows up dwarfed and misshapen. However, when it is infused with radiance and love, it can nurture the most beautiful flowers.

See yourself as a gardener, the Torah is telling us. Within the earth lie flower seeds. Each person carries within him/herself divine beauty and light, by virtue of the fact that we have all been created in the Divine Image. Each of us is an indispensable flower in a grand, cosmic garden. As a gardener, the role of parent and educator is to clean the earth, discard the weeds, and create a nurturing environment so that the seedling inside each child can emerge intact, unencumbered and bloom.

## 6. The Baal Shem Tov's Way (Optional)

This *Emor* method – speaking gently and kindly – was epitomized by the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, who adamantly challenged the preachers of his time who would harshly rebuke sinners. He taught:<sup>5</sup>

A person should give rebuke with love, as the verse says, “God chastises whom He loves.”<sup>6</sup> However, one who seeks to aggrandize himself by admonishing others, or who rebukes solely to make a living and tries to arouse the audience with a wailing voice, as alluded to in the verse, “My tears were my bread,”<sup>7</sup> arouses stringent judgment against the Jewish people.

He illustrated this with the following parable:

There was once a king who, angered by his son, banished him from the royal palace, sending him out into the streets to fend for himself. But he also sent two servants to keep an eye on him.

After a while, one of the servants returned and slandered the prince to his father, describing graphically the prince's misbehavior. The second servant also returned with a report of misbehavior, however, he spoke out of pain for the prince who was banished from his father's presence to the point where he had completely forgotten how to conduct himself in a royal fashion.<sup>8</sup>

Upon hearing the second servant's words, the king realized that he had contributed to the situation by throwing the prince into the streets to fend for himself. He had compassion on his son and sent to fetch him.

So, too, is it with us. When we chastise or criticize others harshly, we only remind God (the king) of how bad they (and the rest of us) are. But when we find a way to do so with love, we also arouse God's compassion – both on the wrongdoers and ourselves.

<sup>5</sup> Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshas Kedoshim. Keser Shem Tov sections 131. 262.

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 3:12.

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 42:4.

<sup>8</sup> Implied in this second servant's report is that the king himself, by banishing his son among common folk, is responsible for his degeneration. This is stated explicitly in Ben Pores Yosef 68d.

## 7. The Lag B'Omer Connection

In this regard, we have a great teacher and role model – who set the tone of how to educate and speak to others with love, even those who needed healing and repair. But this lesson did not come easily...

This great master was none other than Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Rashbi) – whose *yahrzeit* we celebrated tonight, as *Lag B'Omer* begins. As the Rashbi himself requested, that his *yahrzeit* should become a day of great celebration.

The Talmud tells us the following story:<sup>9</sup>

When the Roman rulers of the Holy Land placed a price on the heads of Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, they hid in a cave for twelve years. During this time, they spent every minute of their day studying Torah. When they emerged from the cave, they were shocked to discover people plowing and sowing: How could people set aside the eternal life that is Torah and occupy their days with the transitory life of the material? So intense was their wrath at such folly that whatever met with their burning glance went up in flames. Proclaimed a voice from heaven: “Have you come out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!”

Rabbi Shimon’s thirteenth year of study, while increasing his knowledge and appreciation of the eternal truth of Torah, also taught him the value of endeavors other than his own. Now, wherever he went, his look would heal rather than destroy.

Even one of the greatest of sages and mystics had to reach a higher state of spiritual maturity – a 13th Bar-Mitzvah year – in order not to burn up the world, but to heal it.

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<sup>9</sup> Shabbat 33b.

## 8. Blowing Up the World

And that brings us back to the actions of the Boston terrorists – who sought to blow up the world – and back to our Torah reading where we also read this statement from God: “I shall be sanctified among the children of Israel...”<sup>10</sup>

According to our Sages, this implies that we have the duty to give up our lives, if necessary, rather than betray our covenant with God.

What is the difference between the Jewish concept of *mesirat nefesh* – literally, “giving one’s life for one’s faith” – and the suicidal martyrdom worshiped by radical Islamists?

The answer is simple and it is something that we must teach our children.

## 9. Culture of Life, Culture of Death

Judaism is a culture of life, not a culture of death. Jews are totally committed to living a life that God mandated to the point that they are ready to die for it. Because a life worth living is one in which you live for something that you are ready to die for, but never one that seeks out death. In other words, your commitment is unconditional, not optional, but not one that aspires death.

The Torah advocates love and sanctity of life: “You shall live by them [the Torah and its commandments] and not die by them.”<sup>11</sup> For the aim of the entire Torah is to bring peace to this world, as it says in the Book of Proverbs, “its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 22:32.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 18:5. Sanhedrin 74a. Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah* 5:1.

<sup>12</sup> Rambam, conclusion of Laws of Chanukah. Proverbs 3:16.



## 10. A Few Additional Points

A few additional points:

*Mesriat nefesh* is a mitzvah only when it comes to three transgressions (murder, incest and idolatry). There are many opinions that hold that one is not allowed to give his life for any other reason.<sup>13</sup>

*Mesirat nefesh* is about being ready (and tragically sometimes actually) to die for your faith, never to kill others in the name of faith!

And finally *mesirat nefesh* is about total and utter giving of yourself to God, without a tinge of self-interest involved, not even spiritual self-interest. It is not about gaining something – even heavenly – in return.

They tell the story of a suicide bomber who killed himself and others in the name of Allah. Standing before the pearly gates, he insists on a spot near Abraham. He was turned away and sent to the lowest place in hell, with the explanation: “You took your own life in order to get something else in return (not to mention the innocents you killed in the process to gain your reward). You replaced one of your indulgences for another. Abraham and those who gave their lives in the name of faith did so (reluctantly, mind you) for no gain in return.”

## 11. Abraham and the Akeidah

Now, some point to the *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac – that is, Abraham’s offering of his beloved son in sacrifice to God. They ask: Doesn’t this act bear some similarities to the suicidal attacks in the name of God perpetrated by radical Islamists?

Absolutely not!

The dramatic differences are obvious in many ways.

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<sup>13</sup> See Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 5:1-4, and commentaries there.

- The *Akeidah* was never meant to hurt anyone. It was God's way of testing Abraham's dedication, as we see from the end of the story, that God commands Abraham to not touch Isaac. God never wants human sacrifice – that is a fundamental principle of Torah and Judaism.
- Abraham never killed innocent people. Quite the contrary, he prayed for the infidels of Sodom! The *Akeidah* was an exception – the only such instance – so it clearly had a different purpose (commentaries offer various reasons as to the meaning and purpose of this test). It was not a case of a father killing an innocent child in the name of faith, as we see from the episode's conclusion.
- Abraham was known for his unconditional love for all people. He put himself on the line to protect anyone in danger. Contrast that with the Boston terrorist attack aimed at killing as many people as possible.

## 12. Violence in the Name of Religion

The events of the past week remind us of the destruction wreaked by violence in the name of religion, and this teaches us how careful we must be not to judge and condemn others.

Though we cannot compare the divisiveness in our homes and communities to mass murder, yet in subtle ways we, too, can be guilty of intolerance and abuse of others in the name of faith.

Faith is a very potent force. What people will do in the name of God can be far more formidable (for good or for bad) than in the name of any other force.

The ideology of radical Islam that infected the minds of the Boston terrorists has given birth to thousands (if not more) of faithful individuals ready to sacrifice their lives and kill anyone they see fit in a war against a world opposed to God.

No one wants to hear this fact because then our battle is just too formidable. How will a Western world, complacent with its comforts, ever face the violent passion of thousands, if not millions, of religious zealots?

But hear it we must. And now, with the wake-up call we have just been given, we have a renewed opportunity to recognize the forces at work in Islamic countries today. Not all Muslims feel this way, but many do, and we have no idea how many. We are facing a religious war – nothing more, nothing less. And we must prepare accordingly. This is not just a war against terrorists, criminals and radicals. It is an ideological war – perhaps unprecedented in history.

### 13. The Good News

The good news is that this war has been foreseen long ago by the Jewish prophets, who promised that it would conclude with peace and redemption.

This is the war that began in the home of Abraham, between his children, Ishmael (father of the Arab/Muslim world), Isaac and Jacob (fathers of the Jewish world) and Esau (father of the Western/Roman Christian world). And now we are standing at the final frontier war of the 21st century – the conclusion of these historical battles between Christianity/West/Rome, Islam and Judaism, battles which all trace their roots in Abraham's home.

We must inform and educate ourselves to this war, and above all – passionately commit ourselves to the Divine values that we stand for, with no less energy than those fanatical forces battling against us.

Namely: we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the values of goodness and virtue that will transform this world into an environment of peace, love, and coexistence under one God, bringing on “a world filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Habakkuk 2:14 and Isaiah 11:9.

And this above of what we must teach our children in the aftermath of the Boston terror attack.

## 14. Unprecedented Opportunity

We are faced today with this unprecedented opportunity – to see the war we are fighting as a catalyst to fight the true war against today’s widespread distortions of all sorts – distortions of the facts, distortions of religion, and distortions of what it means to be a human being.

We are all divine flowers and have nothing to fear. Yes, we must be extremely cautious and do whatever it takes to defend our lives and freedoms. Yes, we must go to war to unequivocally eliminate all forces that threaten innocent lives with terrorism and other violence. *But* our calling – and our physical war – must be fueled by our quest for truth, freedom and Godliness.

May we succeed in this quest and witness the Final Redemption where no man will raise a sword against another. And may this happen speedily in our days. Amen.