



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeitzei

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November 24, 2012
Vayeitzei

**Hamas and Haran:
Violence And Wrath**



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

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ABSTRACT

What can we do to help our brethren in Israel? While our hearts and prayers go out to our brothers and sisters who are being terrorized by brazen daily missile attacks from our enemies, we can gain much direction from Jacob’s challenges in Haran in this week’s portion, which uncannily and presciently parallel our challenges today with Hamas.

In Arabic, Hamas seems to mean many things. Some translate it as “zeal” or “fire.” Could that possibly be related to the meaning of the word *hamas* in Hebrew – “violence”? After all, what we call violence they call zeal; what we call murderers, they call “freedom fighters”...

And how far is Hamas from the word Haran – the biblical city whose name means “wrath” – the very city to which Jacob fled when he had to escape the murderous rage of his brother Esau ...

The connection between Hamas and Haran – the story of zeal, fanaticism, fire, wrath – is the story in this week’s chapter of Jacob’s flight to Haran, and his travails in this city of wrath.

Jacob’s story is our story. Jacob’s journey is the journey of every soul entering a physical body in this wrathful and often violent material world. And Jacob’s mission is our mission.

As Hamas terrorizes the Jewish cities as far as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, this sermon links the Torah portion with current events and relates what we all – each one of us – can do about it.

HAMAS AND HARAN: VIOLENCE AND WRATH

1. Our Hearts and Prayers

First and foremost, our hearts and prayers go out to our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land.

Earlier this week I heard a first hand report how last Friday night, Jews at the kotel panicked and were shoved into the tunnels when sirens went off warning of oncoming missiles...

As we speak, our brethren – innocent men, women and children – are being terrorized on a daily basis by brazen missile attacks being launched at them indiscriminately. This time, some of the largest Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, are in range of the missiles and are on vigilant alert.

May God protect and watch over them. May our enemies be vanquished, and may all of Israel be blessed with everlasting peace.

But we must also ask ourselves what can we do to help our nation under attack in Israel?

2. Fear of Winning

On a lighter note let me begin with an anecdote that aptly captures the frustration many of us feel over events in Israel.

With the pressure on Israel mounting and Israel fearful of the future, the Knesset holds a special session to come up with a solution. After several hours of talk without progress one member, Yitzhak, stands up and says “Quiet everyone, I’ve got it, I’ve got the solution to all our problems. Instead of fighting with the Arabs, we’ll declare war on the United States.”

Everyone starts shouting at once. “You’re nuts! That’s crazy!”

“Hear me out!” says Yitzhak. “We attack America. We lose. The United States does what she always does when she defeats a country, as she did with Japan and Germany after WWII. She rebuilds everything; our highways, airports, shipping ports, schools, hospitals, factories, loans us money, and sends us food aid. Our problems would be over.

Suddenly, an old Jewish minister in the back of the Knesset gets up and says: “That’s a very nice idea. But vot happens if vi vin?”

My friends, we Jews have always abhorred war. But when we are being attacked, we must not be afraid to fight. And not be afraid to win.

We Jews of late suffer from a malady of apologetics. We have so mastered the art of defense and survival that we seem to fear winning. We have developed every trick to protect ourselves; we are confident that no one can destroy us. Our psyches seem to have become wired only to fight back, and not to go on the offensive. We have become so accustomed to always being the underdog that we seem to be afraid of finishing the job, as if we would remain clueless what to do next once we achieved a clear victory.

I submit that the time has come for us to behave and live up to our destiny – as winners. We have nothing to be ashamed of or to apologize for. Sure, we have, like everyone, our share of mistakes. But we have brought the world civilization, justice and virtue.

Our cause is just and we did not choose this battle. It was brought upon us by our enemies.

But once we have been forced to defend ourselves, we must fight like winners, confident in our cause, without one arm tied behind our backs.

It is time for us to act like the proud winners we truly are.

3. Violence and Wrath

As the terrorist organization Hamas wages a cruel war against the Jewish civilian population of Israel, we can learn some powerful lessons and gain much direction from Jacob's challenges in Haran in this week's portion, which uncannily and presciently parallel our challenges today with Hamas.

In Arabic, Hamas seems to mean many things. Some translate it as "zeal" or "fire" (it is also the acronym of Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah, "Islamic Resistance Movement"). Could that possibly be related to the meaning of the word *hamas* in Hebrew – "violence"?¹ After all, what we call violence they call zeal; what we call murderers, they call "freedom fighters" ...

And how far is Hamas from the word Haran – the biblical city whose name means "wrath"² – the very city to which Jacob fled when he had to escape the murderous rage of his brother Esau ...

The connection between Hamas and Haran – the story of zeal, fanaticism, fire, wrath – is the subject of this week's Torah reading about Jacob's flight to Haran, and his travails in this city of wrath.

4. The Arduous Journey

This week's Torah portion – *Parshat Vayeitzei* – focuses on Jacob's journey and relates some of the most fascinating events of the Book of Genesis.

We read about how Jacob leaves his parents' home in Beersheva, heading for Haran, the home of his mother's brother – the duplicitous Laban (whose name, ironically, means "white" though he is quite the black-hearted villain).

¹ Genesis 6:11: At the beginning of the story of Noah and the great flood, "the earth was corrupt before God; the earth was filled with violence (*chamas*)."
V'timaleh ha'aretz chamas.

² Rashi on Genesis 11:32; Zohar I, 146a.

We read how, tired from his journey, Jacob falls asleep and dreams of a ladder to heaven – with angels coming and going, and God above. In the dream, God speaks to Jacob and says, “I am the God of Abraham your [grand]father, and the God of Isaac. I will give to you and your descendants the land upon which you are lying...”³

We read how Jacob arrives in Haran ... how he sees his cousin Rachel approaching and single-handedly rolls off the stone from the well, though previously this had taken a group of shepherds to do ... how he falls in love with Rachel and agrees to work for seven years to earn her hand in marriage.⁴

We read how he is cheated on his wedding day under the *chuppah* and tricked into marrying Rachel’s older sister, Leah, and how he works another seven years for his beloved Rachel.⁵

We read how the two sisters and their maidservants become the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel, though Rachel is barren for many years. And we learn how Jacob suffers under the tyranny of his father-in-law, as he later tells him:

“Twenty years I worked for you! ... By day I was consumed by the scorching heat, and by night by the frost. Sleep was snatched from my eyes. Twenty years I have worked for you on your estate – fourteen years for your daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times. If the God of my fathers ... had not been with me, you would have sent me away empty handed!”⁶

We read how Jacob manages to amass a personal fortune, breeding only ringed, spotted and flecked sheep.⁷ And, finally, how after 20 long years, he sets off for the home of his ancestors, the Land of Canaan, the Promised Land, which would in the future be known by his other name – the Land of Israel.

³ Genesis 28:13.

⁴ Genesis 29:10 and 29:18.

⁵ Genesis 29:22 and 29:30

⁶ Genesis 31:38-40.

⁷ Genesis 30:35.

5. What's It All About?

What's this all about? What relevance does Jacob's story have for our lives today?

It seems that it would be enough for the Torah to tell us that he built his family and then returned home. Why the need to elaborate on Jacob's every step, his fears, God's promises, and all the trials and tribulations he endured under the cruel Laban. Bygones are bygones – so why dwell on painful events that happened over 3,500 years ago, in a totally different society, in another part of the planet?

Why?

Because Jacob's story is our story.⁸

Jacob's journey is the journey of every soul entering a physical body in this material world.⁹

The opening verse of this week's Torah reading tells that Jacob left Beersheba and headed toward Haran.

Beersheba – a town whose name literally means the “fountain of seven” – alludes to the root of all souls in the seven divine attributes of the spiritual realms (which correspond to the seven arms of the menorah).

And Haran, as I already mentioned, means “wrath” and refers to the soul's descent from sublime heights to a wrathful world, where the divine is concealed and people can hurt each other. More specifically it refers to every challenge we have in our lives; the different journeys we take and the difficulties we encounter.

⁸ Everything that happened to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) is a sign for their children – in order to teach them about the future (*Midrash Tanchuma Lech Lecha* 9. *Bereishit Rabba* 40:6). Indeed, the Patriarchs were shown what would happen to their descendants. (See Ramban and Bechaya).

⁹ See Ohr HaChaim on the opening verse of *Parshat Vayeitzei*.

6. Our Fears

Every challenge initially evokes our fears. Can I do it? Can I overcome adversity? Do I have what it takes? This time maybe my enemy will be too powerful? What will I do if I fail? Perhaps it's not worth the effort?

The questions go on.

Our fears may even pervade our dreams, causing us nightmares...

Comes Jacob's story to teach us that our illustrious ancestor once also embarked on a very challenging journey, and he too was afraid. But instead of nightmares, he had a dream and heard a promise:

"I am the God of Abraham your [grand]father and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land upon which you are lying. Your descendants will be [plentiful] like the dust of the earth. You shall spread out to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families on earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this soil. I will not turn away from you until I have fully kept this promise to you."¹⁰

God's promise gave strength to Jacob to forge ahead, build a family, and establish the foundation for a nation of which we are a part. So, God's promise to Jacob should imbue us with strength to move forward and thrive just as he did!

7. Current Events

This message is especially relevant today in light of current events - what is happening to our courageous brothers and sisters living in the Land of Israel.

And the parallels are striking.

¹⁰Genesis 28:13-15.

For example, Laban “wanted to uproot everyone” as we read in the Haggadah:

Go forth and learn what Laban, the Aramean, wanted to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh had issued a decree against the male children only, but Laban wanted to uproot everyone, as it is written: “The Aramean wished to destroy my father.”¹¹ So too have our enemies risen generation after generation.

Prefacing this statement, the Haggada reminds us:

For not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise against us to destroy us.

8. Hamas: Just Like Laban

Today, too, Hamas (just like Laban of Haran) calls for the destruction of the entire Israel. Its adherents see Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as “occupied” territories. Here are just a few chilling statements from the Hamas charter – its mission statement for continued terror:

- Preface: “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.” (This is quoting Imam Hassan al Banna.)
- Article 7: “The Islamic Resistance Movement aspires to the realization of Allah’s promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said: “The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews, when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Muslims ... there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.”

¹¹ Deuteronomy 26:50.

- Article 13: “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad.”

How close does this echo the intentions of Laban to “uproot everyone”?

And how uncanny is it that Hamas and Haran are so closely linked – in name and meaning?

9. God is With Us

But, just like then, today too, God is with us, and He will protect us from all those that want to do us harm, as the Haggadah testifies:

This is what has stood by our fathers and us ... [Despite all our enemies intentions] the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand!

[Jacob] went down to Egypt and sojourned there with a few persons; and there they became a nation – great and mighty and numerous ... [But] the Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and imposing harsh slavery on us. We cried out to God, Lord of our ancestors, and God heard our voice, seeing our suffering, our harsh labor, and our distress. God then brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm with great visions and with signs and miracles. He brought us to this place – the Land of Israel – giving us this land flowing with milk and honey.¹²

So, we can be certain that God protects all his people at all times. As King David put it so beautifully in his Psalms: “Behold, the protector of Israel does not slumber nor sleep.”¹³ And as the Torah assures us: “[The Land of Israel is] a land your God looks after; the eyes of God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”¹⁴

¹² Deuteronomy 26:6-9.

¹³ Psalms 121:4.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 11:12.

10. Doing Our Part

But like Jacob, we must do our part. We ought never ask – as that old Jew did in the Knesset: “But vot happens if vi vin?”

We must forge ahead with strength and total confidence in our cause and in God’s protection and blessings, for He promised us that we will not just survive but thrive.

And most of all, we must stick together.

It is no surprise that the current outbreak began on the threshold of the Hebrew month of Kislev, the month in which we vanquished our enemies and prevailed in the story of Chanukah. The Holiday of Lights symbolizes the victory of Jewish spirit and light over all its adversaries. This victory is commemorated with the kindling of the menorah, which was lit daily in the Holy Temple.

During this time of the year, we traditionally increase in all our commitments – in our Torah study, prayer and charity.

[Optional] And when we are praying we might all consider a wonderful grassroots program which links each Jew with an Israeli soldier. Go to www.shmiraproject.com enter your name and you receive the name of an Israeli soldier to pray for.

Above all, we all need to intensify our love and kindness to each other – counterbalancing the dark forces that surround us, then just as now.¹⁵

¹⁵ See also the text of a letter written by the Rebbe of Chabad Lubavitch, where he recommends increase in Torah study, prayer and giving to charity: http://www.meaningfullife.com/currentevents/israel/What_Can_We_Do_about_the_Situation_in_IsraelQUESTION.php.

When divisiveness infected our people, the Holy Temple – which bridged spirit and matter – could no longer stand.¹⁶ There was no room for it in a fractured world. It no longer was appreciated and no longer served its purpose. But just as divisiveness destroyed the Temple, unity can rebuild it.

And so now, as never before, we must unite together and do everything on the personal/individual level, on the community level, on the national level and on the global level to demonstrate that *Am Yisrael Chai* – that the Nation of Israel not only lives, but lives together as one!

11. The Big Picture (Optional)

Of course, first and foremost everything must be done in the immediate to protect the innocent. But in the long term, there is a big picture. Coupled with the physical battle is also a psychological and spiritual one.

The enemy has made it clear that they want all of Israel and that their battle is a religious one. We are not just defending our right to live, but also our right to live as Jews in the Promised Land of Israel. Our cause is not just self-preservation, but one filled with history, destiny, soul, spirit, all saturated with the bedrock of God's giving the Jewish people – beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the Promised Land and charging us with the mission to be a holy nation and a light unto all nations.

All the past battles in Israel, going back to the Babylonian and Roman destruction of the Temple were ultimately part of an ongoing spiritual and religious battle, which reflects the battle of all life.

The battle of life is not for land, honor or wealth. It is for the dominance of spirit over matter. The prominence of love over wrath (Haran); peace over violence; gentleness over zeal (Hamas). Our greatest challenge is not political but spiritual. It is about finding purpose and direction; about aligning our lives with our Divine calling.

¹⁶ Talmud, Yoma 9b.

And in this larger spiritual battle all of us have been drafted and mobilized. We all must participate, through intensifying our efforts in reconnecting with our inner purpose – through our increased study, prayer and charity – thereby creating internal harmony. Above all, we must do all we can to diminish divisiveness and foster love among each other.

As long as we do not understand the current confrontation – some call it a “clash of civilizations” – we will continue to be its victim, and we will be putting out fires in a never-ending, vicious cycle.

But, the ultimate victor will not be the one with the most powerful weapons. It will be the one with the most powerful spiritual vision.

So while all peace-loving people grieve over the tragic loss of any life, and pray for the end of all hostilities – we must always remember that even while we are forced to deal with the short-term challenges, there looms a much larger picture.

The universe is at war and has always been at war – the raging battle between materialism and spirituality, between personal gain and higher purpose, between kindness and wrath, between matter and spirit. Center stage of this war – now and throughout history – has always been Israel.

12. Wake Up!

Remember this and wake up! This is not a time to slumber or sleep!

And perhaps this is the power of God’s promise “Behold, the protector of Israel does not slumber nor sleep” – even when we may.

May the Protector of Israel bless and safeguard all our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land, especially those sacred souls – the soldiers of the IDF – who sacrifice their lives daily to protect others.

Just as Jacob went on his way in peace – despite Laban pursuing him, and Esau lying in wait – and returned to Israel from Haran in peace, with his entire family all healthy and intact, so too may it be now. Says the Torah:

Jacob continued on his way. And he encountered angels of God. When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp...”¹⁷

May we immediately merit to see that day when the Land of Israel and the whole world is God’s camp – a true home for Divine. When “there is no more hunger and no more war, no more jealousy and no more strife.”¹⁸

And the prophecy of Isaiah finally comes true – when all warring nations “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. [When no] nation lifts up a sword against another nation...”¹⁹ Amen.

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¹⁷ Genesis 32:2-3.

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 9:2.

¹⁹ Isaiah 2:2-4.