



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayigash

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 22, 2012

Vayigash

**Joseph And The Children
Of Sandy Hook**



Meaningful Sermons

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Surely every one of us painfully identifies with the grieving parents of Newtown. Last Friday started out for them as any perfectly normal day, and it ended as the worst nightmare.

It was such a nice morning – parents dressed their children, packed their lunches, sent them off to school. And then the peace of this postcard-perfect town was shattered, never to be restored again.

It’s heart-wrenching to just look at the ages of the little victims -
- all six or seven years old.

The parents of one of them – Noah Pozner (a Jewish boy, by-the-way, who was shot 11 times) – moved to Newtown from Brooklyn because they believed that it was safer than the inner city. Where will they go now? Where will they find peace? How will they make sense of this senseless tragedy?

As Jews, we look for answers in the Torah. And indeed, that is where we always do find them. And there we are struck by an uncanny parallel between Newtown and an event which took place 3,557 years ago.

Back then, another young child was marked for death by his own brothers but then was sold into slavery instead. Over the past couple of weeks we have been reading his shocking story, which culminates in this Torah portion.

After a twenty-two-year estrangement, Joseph is finally reunited with his brothers. And what we have to marvel at here is his surprising response to them. We have much to learn from it ... how to cherish our children... how to respond to this and any other tragedy which may seem too great to bear ... how to grow through it ... and how to prevent anything like it in the future. And all that has to do with how we treat and what we must teach our children now.

JOSEPH AND THE CHILDREN OF SANDY HOOK

Responding To A Tragedy Too Great To Bear

1. Newtown

Surely every one of us sitting here today painfully identifies with the grieving parents of Newtown. Last Friday started out for them as any perfectly normal day, and it ended as the worst nightmare.

It was such a nice morning - parents dressed their children, packed their lunches, sent them off to school. And then the peace of this postcard-perfect town was shattered, never to be restored again.

It's heart-wrenching to just look at the ages of the little victims:

Charlotte, 6

Daniel, 7

Olivia, 6

Josephine, 7

Ana, 6

Dylan, 6

Madeleine, 6

Catherine, 6

Chase, 7

Jesse, 6

James, 6
Grace, 7
Emilie, 6
Jack, 6
Noah, 6
Caroline, 6
Jessica, 6
Avielle, 6
Benjamin, 6
Allison, 6

The parents of one of these children – Noah Pozner (a Jewish boy, by-the-way, who was shot 11 times) – moved to Newtown from Brooklyn because they believed that it was safer than the inner city.¹ Where will they go now? Where will they find peace? How will they make sense of this senseless tragedy?

As Jews, we look for answers in the Torah. And indeed, that is where we always do find them.

2. Uncanny Parallel

As we all grieve for the 20 innocent children brutally gunned down in Newtown by a 20 year old “kid,” and for those 7 adults, some of who gave their lives to heroically prevent more little lives from being lost, it is difficult to ignore the uncanny parallel we find in an event described by the Torah that took place 3,557 years ago.

Back then, another young child was marked for death by his own brothers but then was sold into slavery instead. Over the past couple of weeks we have been reading his shocking story, which culminates in this Torah portion.

¹ See: <http://forward.com/articles/167759/jewish-child-shot-11-times-in-newtown-rampage/>

After a twenty-two-year estrangement, Joseph is finally reunited with his brothers. And what we have to marvel at here is his surprising response to them. We have much to learn from it:

- How to respond to this and any other tragedy which may seem too great to bear ...
- How to grow through it ...
- And how to prevent anything like it in the future.

3. The Cause

Before we look at what the Torah has to teach us, let's explore the deeper underlying causes of this terrible tragedy; the environment that allows for such carnage to occur in the first place.

As expected, everybody has an opinion, with a flood of commentary deluging us via all possible mediums - everyone identifying different culprits, analyzing the current state of affairs, searching for the causes that allow for tragedies like this, the need to institute new gun controls, overhaul mental health care, etc. etc.

Obviously, a chilling massacre like this, especially of innocent children, is a result of many complex reasons. Yet, that should not stop of us from doing all we can to eliminate or at least minimize any cause we can identify and tackle.

It's also self understood that we need both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term - in doing everything possible to prevent anything like this happening again. Long term - to look at the root issues that allow such unspeakable behavior to take hold in the first place.

I, for one, would like to focus on what appears to be a growing problem, and which I think lies at the heart of the issue (or is at least one of the primary core problems) - and that is the general deteriorating respect for the absolute value of human life.

After the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999 – in which two seniors murdered 12 students and 1 teacher and injured 21 others before committing suicide – a colleague of mine gave a talk at a Jewish high school in Australia.

Addressing a group of about 150 students (ages 13 through 16), he asked them if such a horrendous killing could take place in a school like theirs, with perfectly normal students turning on their classmates and shooting them down in cold blood.

My colleague was sure that the students would answer in the negative, arguing that it couldn't happen in a Jewish school, or that things like this happen only in America. Instead, most of the kids who raised their hands said that they could see it happening in their school, as sad as that sounds.

My colleague then asked them to speculate about the reasons why. The answers ranged from overexposure to violent video games, films and TV shows, to drugs and mental instability. Some spoke about the ease of access to firearms.

But then one student raised his hand and said something that grabbed everyone's attention: "I think these guys were bored, and did not place much value on life. All it needed was something to spark their action – perhaps they were thinking about doing this for a long time, until it became a real possibility."

This student hit a nerve: Indeed, a combination of emptiness, exposure to violence – and above all, lack of fundamental respect for the sanctity and dignity of every human life – creates a volatile combustion chamber, which becomes a ticking time bomb, a disaster waiting to happen.

It's not just that the kids who killed at Columbine – or, for that matter Adam Lanza, the gunman at Sandy Hook – didn't value *other* lives, they also didn't value their own lives.

Living in a highly technological and materialistic universe with full awareness of 7 billion people tends to depersonalize and desensitize us. Throw into the equation all the media messages that tell us that our value is based on nothing more than our looks, status or buying power – all superficial externals that don't last. Then add in to the brew wanton violence on TV, aggressive sports, projected illusions of a virtual reality, and unavailable parenting or nurturing. Pepper it with a few other x factors – like divorce, abuse, drugs and alcohol, bad friends, loneliness – and you have a powder keg waiting to explode. Thank God it doesn't always explode, and not all those ingredients are always in place. But no one would deny that, at this moment, conditions across country exist where such an eruption can take place anywhere, anytime.

Case in point that demonstrates how devalued life has become: In January 1979, 16-year-old Brenda Ann Spencer opened fire on children arriving at Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego from her house across the street, killing two men and wounding eight students and a police officer. Brenda Ann used a rifle her father had given her as a gift. When she was asked why she had done it, she told reporters, "I don't like Mondays. This has livened up the day."

We live in a toxic environment. In a society where life can become so frivolous that someone would just take innocent lives to relieve their boredom...

What is wrong with our society?

In one word: sanctity. Appreciating the divine sanctity of every life.

I am not suggesting that the lack of this appreciation is the sole cause for such killings. But one thing is certain: That when people truly value life – their own as well as others – it is far less likely for such events to take place. Infusing our citizens with unwavering respect of every life is perhaps the greatest immunity we can build to prevent wanton murder.

We cannot solve every problem and counter every one of the factors that I have enumerated. But one major thing we can do is address the core issue of valuing the sanctity of every life, including our own, as well as the sanctity of our experience, no matter how harsh.

Adam Lanza may have been emotionally troubled or mentally imbalanced. Brenda Ann Spencer was purportedly a victim of abuse. But I suspect that had they – as well as many other killers – been nurtured and taught the unconditional love of life, beginning with their own, had their tortured psyches not been that exposed to a climate of violence and devaluation of life, they may never have come to such terrible acts.

4. Lessons from Joseph

And here we have much to learn from the story of Joseph.

Joseph too was a young man when he was nearly killed and then sold into slavery by none other than his own brothers. And yet, no matter how much he suffered – and no matter how much his brothers may have deserved punishment for their actions – Joseph was too healthy and self-confident, he had too much respect for the dignity of his own life to wallow in self-pity, or vent his anger on his brothers, or seek revenge.

His attitude allowed him to go outside his own painful experiences and see the bigger picture. As he told his brothers:

... Don't worry or feel guilty because you sold me, for God has sent me ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the area ... God sent me ahead of you to insure that you survive in the land and to sustain you through great deliverance. It is not you who sent me here, but God. And it is He who has made me Pharaoh's viceroy, master of his entire government and ruler of all Egypt."²

Unbelievable!

² Genesis 45:1-11.

Was Joseph so detached that he forgot all the pain that his brothers caused him? Hardly. Joseph was anything but detached. It was Joseph who “could not control his emotions.” One could hardly call this detached. But Joseph was more invested in what he saw as his divine mission – to use his position of power to save lives, and first and foremost the lives of his family.

So the fascinating question is this: What allowed Joseph to transcend all the anguish that his brothers caused him and have the presence of mind and heart to recognize that “it is not you who sent me here, but God”?

5. Jacob’s Example

A big part of the reason why Joseph was able to react the way he did when put to the test has to do with the way his father Jacob educated and nurtured him – making him feel special, valued and loved.³

Indeed, the Midrash⁴ tells us that when Jacob was told that Joseph was alive (after thinking him as dead for 22 years) he initially did not believe it. It was only when “they spoke to him the words that Joseph spoke to them,” which consisted of the last Torah law that Jacob had studied together with Joseph before Joseph disappeared, that “the spirit of Jacob was revived” and he hurried to Egypt to see his beloved son.⁵

Thus we see how Jacob’s love and education of Joseph imbued Joseph with the supreme confidence and security to withstand his ordeals, and come out a far greater person.

We see this also from the following episode:

Joseph’s greatest test came in the house of his Egyptian master, Potiphar. It seems Mrs. Potiphar took a liking to him, and she pursued him relentlessly, doing everything in her power to seduce him.

³ See Genesis 37:3: He loved him more than any of his sons.

⁴ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 94:3; Rashi, Genesis 45:27.

⁵ Genesis 45:26-27.

Joseph, who was trusted by his master with the responsibility over the entire household, refused time and again. He told her:

“My master ... has entrusted me with everything he owns. No one in his house has more power than I have. He has not kept back anything at all from me, except for you – his wife. How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!”⁶

But once his resolve was shaken. And in that moment, says the Midrash, his father’s face appeared before him. This gave him the strength to flee from her.⁷

Jacob made sure that Joseph always knew that he loved him, and this love remained with Joseph throughout his ordeals and challenges.

Jacob’s deep love for Joseph and the impact it had on his entire life, carrying him even through the harshest circumstances, teaches us the vital importance of how we must love our children and imbue them with values, which will remain with them forever, empowering them even in times of trial.

And this is the reason why the Torah puts such a premium on teaching our children. We are required to recite the *Shema* three times a day and while the primary message of this prayer is the oneness of God, teaching our children this message “diligently” is stressed as well.⁸

6. Our Children

I submit that the most powerful preventive medicine for crime is to infuse our children with the belief in the absolute dignity and sanctity of every soul – starting with their own – and with the unshakable faith that every life has been created by God in the Divine Image. To know and appreciate that God created us and expects us to live up to the highest standards.

⁶ Genesis 39:8-9.

⁷ Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 87:7; Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeishev 8-9; Zohar, Vayechi 222a. See also Talmud, Sotah 36b, quoted in Rashi to Genesis 39:11-12.

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

Despite any challenge a child will experience, his self-confidence and self-value – and his accountability to a Higher Authority – will help him not succumb to his most base instincts.

We will never know for sure, but I wonder if we would ever have heard of Adam Lanza – despite his pathology – would he have been exposed to this attitude.

There are no guarantees, but if every person on earth cherished life the way it deserves to be cherished – the way Joseph embraced life and all life experiences – many crimes we witness would never happen in the first place.

Yes, we must do everything possible to prevent guns getting into the wrong hands, and we must take all other security measures, but above all, we must ensure that even if all that fails, a young person would never use a gun to take another life.

As President Barack Obama pointed out in the aftermath of the tragedy:

No single law, no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society, but that can't be an excuse for inaction. Surely we can do better than this...

7. The Torah Criterion

I once read a sociologist's answer to what criteria determine the value of a particular society. He listed: 1) standard of living, 2) per capita income, 3) health care, 4) respect for human rights.

By these standards our society today is ranked highest in all of history.

But by contrast, the Torah lists none of these criteria. The Torah has only one criterion that determines the level of a society: the welfare of our children.

The Torah's central focus in virtually every mitzvah, Shabbat and holidays, orbits around our children: "Teach your children diligently,"⁹ the Torah says. "When your child will ask, answer."¹⁰ Witness the emphasis on children in the *Shema*, in the Passover *Haggadah*, in Jewish law and history.

Maimonides, writing more than 800 years ago, admonished every Jewish community to educate its children, and he was not referring merely to reading, writing and 'rithmetic. He was referring to the moral and ethical education contained in Torah study. He wrote:

Appoint teachers for the children in every country, province and city. If a city does not have a school, excommunicate the people of the city until they get teachers for the children. If they don't, destroy the city, because the world exists only because of the breath of children studying.¹¹

But such an emphasis on children is not an American priority today. Indeed, Americans spend more on their pets than on the education of their children. Yes, we rank high when it comes to the standard of living or per capita income but not when it comes to caring for our children

Children are our future, our legacy and as such are our single most valuable commodity. Yet we do not put their welfare at the top. That must change.

8. Will America Get Back On Track?

America's Founding Fathers had it right: Despite their flaws they understood what the foundation of a healthy society is – as they declared in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

⁹Deuteronomy 6:6-7.

¹⁰Deuteronomy 32:7.

¹¹Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Learning Torah 2:1.

Clearly they learned the Torah's lesson – as reflected in Jacob's education and love of Joseph – that the foundation for everything is cherishing the absolute divine value of life.

But then America lost its way, as did much of the world. Material success has an insidious way of eroding our core values.

Now, with the tragedy at Sandy Hook we have had a rude awakening. But hopefully the lesson will remain with us: The single most important message America and the world needs to hear today is that: Life is sacred. Teach that to every child. Drill that message into every soul. Your life and the life of others is priceless.

Tragically, the lack of this type of education has now come to haunt us in the worst possible way. It had to take tragedy to wake up America.

As President Obama said in his speech at the Newtown memorial:

This is our first task, caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged.

And by that measure, can we truly say, as a nation, that we're meeting our obligations? Can we honestly say that we're doing enough to keep our children, all of them, safe from harm? Can we claim, as a nation, that we're all together there, letting them know they are loved and teaching them to love in return?

Can we say that we're truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose?

I've been reflecting on this the last few days, and if we're honest with ourselves, the answer's no. We're not doing enough. And we will have to change.

With all the recent distractions of various politics, fiscal issues, health insurance and the likes, these brutal murders in Sandy Hook Elementary suddenly shook us all up and elicited the President to declare – the message taught long ago by Jacob:

There's only one thing we can be sure of, and that is the love that we have for our children, for our families, for each other ... The joy that [our children] bring, the wonder we see through their eyes, that fierce and boundless love we feel for them, a love that takes us out of ourselves and binds us to something larger, we know that's what matters.

We know we're always doing right when we're taking care of them, when we're teaching them well, when we're showing acts of kindness. We don't go wrong when we do that.

9. Quality Time (Inspirational Story)

A colleague related this story of a father who took his children on an exotic vacation. After they returned, the grandparents queried the children about the highlight of their trip.

The father listened, expecting the children to relate the day they rode the elephant, or the day they saw the world's most magnificent waterfall. But what he heard each one of them describe was something mundane. "The day Dad and I had ice cream in the park." Or, "The day Dad took me to the beach."

He couldn't believe his ears. And then he realized what each child's highlight had in common with the others. Each child valued the time that their Dad spent alone with him or her. It was not the exotic sights that mattered, but the quality time they each spend with their Dad - with him alone, one on one.

He resolved from then on to change his parenting style and to give each child what each one craved - individual love.

10. What Can We Do?

It all begins with us.

When we make ourselves knowledgeable in Torah, we have something to teach our children.

When we value ourselves, see ourselves as created in the Divine Image, we have something to model for our children.

When we react calmly to adversity, and see God's hands in the challenges in our lives, we communicate that to our children.

Our hearts go out to the families that have had their beautiful children torn away from them in their infancy. We learn from Joseph that despite the difficulties, we cannot allow ourselves to be broken and fall.

Let us honor these children – and all our children – by resolving here and now that our most precious commodity is our children. Our greatest priority is to imbue in every child the unconditional value of their lives and every life.

We must teach every child on this planet that we do not live in a jungle or in a video game; we were created by God, and were sent to earth for a purpose: to live good and virtuous lives; to cherish every person and live up to the highest standards. We are accountable to God's "eye that sees and ear that hears." To transform our corner of the world into a divine home.

There is no time like now. Let us all take on this awesome challenge and may God bless us with success. Amen.