



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayishlach

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Vayishlach

**Israel vs. The World:
The Nation That Dwells Alone**



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

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ABSTRACT

With the overwhelming U.N. vote in favor of a “state” of Palestine – which included Western powers such as France – the Jewish Homeland finds itself standing alone, yet again, against the world.

But as hard as it is to swallow the implied condemnation of the majority of nations, is it really bad to stand alone? Isn't this the way it was always meant to be, as the Book of Numbers tells us: Israel “is a nation that dwells alone and is not be reckoned among the nations?”

That state of existential loneliness began for the Jewish people on the lonely night that our forefather Jacob wrestled with the stranger – a dramatic episode we read about in this week's Torah portion: “And Jacob remained alone.”

What is the meaning and significance of Jacob's loneliness? Is he the archetype of the lonely human being? The lonely sense we all have – that despite loving family and friends, at the core of our being, there is a part of us that cannot totally connect with anyone else.

Loneliness seems to be at the core of the human condition – both on a personal level and on a collective level, as demonstrated by the isolation of Israel.

However, despite the fact that this is how it must be – for that lonely place can never be truly filled as long as the divine purpose is concealed in this world – there is an antidote to the problem, as this sermon reveals.

**ISRAEL vs. THE WORLD:
THE NATION THAT DWELLS ALONE**

1. All Alone

A man goes to the doctor complaining that he's depressed and lonely. He says that life seems harsh and cruel, and he feels all alone in a threatening world, where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain.

The doctor advises him: "Your treatment is simple. A great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick up your spirits."

The man bursts into tears. "But, doctor...I am Pagliacci."

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A school teacher started his first job at a primary school and was eager to make a good impression on the kids. So, when he noticed a boy standing all by himself during recess, while the other kids were playing a game of soccer, he walked up to him and asked "Are you alright"?

The boy assured him everything was fine and the teacher left it at that. A few minutes later, however, he noticed that the boy was still standing alone and had not joined the other boys.

Deciding to find out what was wrong this time, the teacher approached him again and said, "Hi, are you sure you're not feeling left out? Would you like me to be your friend?"

The boy obviously felt a little embarrassed, but after a little hesitation said, "Maybe." Encouraged by his progress, the teacher asked, "Tell me, why are you standing here alone?"

"Because," the boy said with clear exasperation in his voice. "I am the goalie."

2. U.N. Vote

On Thursday, the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to accept into its ranks the “state” of Palestine. Although it will hold “non-member” status, Palestine is now officially recognized as a state by the U.N.

The U.N. passed this resolution despite the fact that half of Palestine’s territory (Gaza) is ruled by Hamas, an internationally-condemned terrorist organization which continually tries to make good on its pledge to destroy Israel, and the other half is ruled by a weak, corrupt and ineffectual entity called the Palestinian Authority. The two halves have little to do with each other – indeed Hamas ousted the Palestinian Authority out of Gaza in a coup – and are separated by miles of Israeli land.

The U.N. passed this resolution despite the fact that by doing so it was going counter to its own charter and to international law that defines the prerequisites for statehood. These are: a permanent population; a defined territory; effective government; and a capacity to enter into relations with other states. Currently, the Palestinian Authority does not satisfy any of these criteria.

None of this impeded the passing of the U.N. resolution – in favor of which voted several Western powers, including France and others. And the end result was another slap in the face of the Jewish state.

Wasel Abu Yusef, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said that, following the U.N. vote, his organization was expecting “the international community to work toward ending Israeli occupation of Palestine.” This, he said, included implementation of previous U.N. resolutions that demand the dismantling Israeli West Bank settlements, which he called a “war crime.”¹ And Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas said the U.N. vote would pave the way for the PA “to pursue claims against Israel at the United Nations, human rights treaty bodies and the International Court of Justice.”²

¹ *Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 28, 2012: <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=293707>

² *New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/world/middleeast/palestinians-renew-push-for-enhanced-un-status.html>

So again, Israel finds itself standing alone – with rather lukewarm backing from the U.S. which (despite its huge disbursement of foreign aid and the leverage power that goes with it) did not manage stop the U.N. vote.

But then again, Israel was always meant to be “a nation that dwells alone,” as the Book of Numbers puts it.³

Why does the Torah see our isolation as a virtue? Because it demonstrates our uniqueness – how we stand apart from all others.

That state of existential loneliness began for the Jewish people on the lonely night when our forefather Jacob wrestled with the stranger – a dramatic episode we read about in this week’s Torah portion.

3. The Lonely Night

As the story opens, Jacob is returning to the land of his birth where he knows he will have to confront his twin brother Esau, who has sworn to kill him. Having prepared for the confrontation and taken measures to protect his vast household – his wives, children, servants, and livestock – Jacob spends the night by himself. This is how the Torah tells it:

Jacob remained alone. And a stranger wrestled with him until just before daybreak. When he [the stranger] saw that he could not defeat him, he struck the upper joint of Jacob’s thigh and his hip became dislocated, as he [continued to] wrestle with the stranger.

“Let me leave!” said the stranger. “Dawn is breaking.”

“I will not let you leave, unless you bless me.”

“What is your name?”

“Jacob.”

“Your name will no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have contended with God and man, and you have prevailed.”⁴

³Numbers 23:9.

⁴Genesis 32:25-29.

Now let us mine this story for its deeper meaning and discover what relevance it holds of us in our quest to understand and wrestle with our own loneliness, which we all feel – don't we?

4. Existential Loneliness (Optional)

We might have a loving spouse and family, and be surrounded by nurturing and supportive friends and community. But at the core of our being, we feel that there is a part of us that cannot totally connect with anyone else, a part of us that exists inside, apart and alone.

Each one of us has that sense of a lonely place inside. And a longing to fill it.

That longing drives us to bond with others, sends us on a search for love, intimacy, and companionship. If it is not properly understood, that longing can lead us to break off relationships as we continue to pursue that illusive "someone" who will fill the void.

But it is a void that cannot be filled for us by any single human being. It arises from the very fact that God's presence in this world is concealed. That concealment is necessary if we are to have the ability to exercise our free will, but at the same time it creates a void of disconnection from our source – hence loneliness, hence the existential nature of it.

And yet we are not doomed. There is a solution to existential loneliness, because God would not throw us into the roiling waters of a hostile world without a paddle. That solution, of course, is spelled out in the Torah.

5. The Jacob in Each of Us

To begin with, each character in the Torah is an archetype of a personality, which exists within us. And Jacob represents the human being alone. A human who wrestles with a stranger. A human who prevails and walks away, injured but blessed.

Jacob's story is the story of a lonely soul doing battle against the material forces of this physical world. We see this in Jacob's struggle with his twin brother Esau, and in his struggle with the stranger (whom biblical commentators identify as the angel/spirit of Esau⁵).

The struggling soul is often compared to a flame. As the Book of Proverbs puts it, "The soul of a human being is the candle of God."⁶ If you observe a lit candle, you will see a battle going on between the flame and the wick through which the flame obtains its fuel. As the fuel is slowly being consumed, the flame is struggling to reach upward, but the wick pulls it to the ground.

This reach and pull of the flame – called *ratz v'shuv* ("run and return") in Kabbalah – is a phenomenon also apparent in electricity. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for electricity – *chashmal* – comes from the Prophet Ezekiel's vision, in which he saw energy going to and fro between the earth and heaven, like the slashed "Z" we associate with lightning.⁷

The energy of the human body also exhibits this dynamic. Think of the heart and breath, both have two alternating poles – the heart contracts and expands, and so do the lungs which allow a human being to inhale and exhale. Without that, there is no life – these two opposing forces are absolutely necessary to create the life flow.

And so it is with Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Esau, who is a hunter and a warrior, represents matter, the physical, the down-to-earth. Jacob, the scholar, represents the spiritual, the transcendent, the innocent.

⁵ *Bereishit Rabba* 77:3. 78:3. *Tanchuma Vayishlach* 8. *Zohar Bereishit* 170a. Rashi. See *Hosea* 12:4-5

⁶ Proverbs 20:27.

⁷ Ezekiel 1:4, 1:13-14.

We are all born innocent (like Jacob), but as we grow and interact with the world, we experience many of life's cruelties against which we have to defend ourselves. So, we have to learn to become warriors. Some go farther in that direction than others, but we all struggle with these two forces.

6. Idealism vs. Materialism

In our lives, the physical needs (food, shelter, clothing) are always battling with the transcendental needs (virtue, truth, spirituality).

This battle can take on the shape of work vs. family – how much time to spend at work and how much with the kids. It can take on the shape of materialism vs. idealism – how much energy to invest in accumulating wealth and how much in doing altruistic good works.

A teacher had a student who abandoned scholarly pursuits for the world of business. He manufactured galoshes in Eastern Europe where unpaved roads made them a necessity, and he became quite wealthy. After a time, he came to visit his former teacher, who took one look at him and seeing his total immersion in work, said, "I've seen feet in galoshes, but I've never seen a head in galoshes." The teacher saw that this man was living and breathing his business; his spirit was totally invested in his materialistic pursuit.

How many of us lead lives like that?

For how many of us is the soul held hostage by the body's demands? Should not the soul – our higher self – be dictating to the body what to do?

I mean, imagine your hand holding a hammer with which you intend to pound in a nail, and suddenly the hammer and the nail start telling you what to do. Isn't the body – which is only the tool of the soul – doing the same thing when it dictates the order of your life? It should be the other way around, no?

7. The Stranglehold of the Physical

Unfortunately, the physical universe has such a stranglehold on us that it is often extremely difficult to get our priorities straight. The price we pay is in dissonance – a feeling of disconnection from our soul – from our source in God – and the more acutely it is felt, the greater the sense of existential loneliness.

Of course, we all experience times of existential loneliness. There is no person who does not feel alone at times, but for some this loneliness can be unbearable, for others a part of life.

At one time, the famed satirist Dorothy Parker had an office in a New York skyscraper. As no one ever came to see her, she felt very lonely. When the sign-painter came to inscribe a name on someone's office door, she persuaded him to paint over the name on her door and instead write POWDER ROOM.

Some people will do anything to overcome loneliness. We all know those who keep themselves busy with all kinds of distractions, trying to relieve the deep pain that they feel. Others resort to chemical substances.

The latter is, unfortunately, a route that many young people take today to satisfying a soul hunger that they feel. Once drugs or alcohol are seen as a remedy for existential loneliness, addiction is bound to follow. Because unless you get to the root of the problem – unless you feed the void inside a passionate soul yearning for expression with healthy nourishment – the yearning will continue and get worse and seek unhealthy channels.

Some people have to hit rock bottom before they begin to deal with this problem at the root. But even those who don't have to go that far must acknowledge the void. Only then can they fill it with healthy nourishment to satisfy the plaintive yearnings of a soul denied expression.

The yearning soul begs for our attention. Its voice is the voice of Jacob, but that voice is often silenced by Esau,⁸ the voice of the warrior within us.

⁸ See Genesis 27:22.

8. Jacob's Victory

Such is the battle of spirit and matter, and the greatest people we meet in life are those who have fought this battle and allowed the soul to win. You know them because they have retained an innocence about them that is not naïve, but is youthful and vibrant. To win, they have paid a price, but they consider it well worth it.

Jacob's price was a damaged hip. But he was also blessed and his new name – Israel – became the name of the Jewish people and their homeland: the Land of Israel, home to the Children of Israel, the Nation of Israel.

Jacob's battle yielded something very positive, even though he was wounded. He won the power for us all to prevail against all odds.

Because of him, we the Jewish people know that nothing can prevail over us – no pogrom, no holocaust, no intifada, and no U.N. resolution.

“When Golda Meir held the office of Israeli Prime Minister, she tried to encourage Kissinger to make Israel a top priority. He sent a letter: “I would like to inform you that I'm first an American citizen; second, Secretary of State; and third a Jew.” Meir responded: “In Israel, we read from right to left.

Oh yes, we feel the pain of loneliness. It is not easy to be the nation that constantly must stand alone.

We don't ignore it, and we don't deny it. But because we *know* we will always prevail, we keep building.

Jacob won the battle, and this means so can we all.

Though you may feel alone because God is concealed, He is there with you. He has given you the power to overcome whatever is thrown at you.

And what's more – no matter how alone you feel in your struggle – there is comfort in the knowledge that those around you are engaged in the same struggle. So though your battle is your own and only you can fight it, there are countless others fighting alongside of you.

In psychological terms, this means that whenever you find yourself descending into that lonely place, you can always find people to connect to, to identify with. As the Billy Joel song goes, “Yes, they’re sharing a drink they call loneliness, but it’s better than drinking alone.” Or as Leonard Cohen sings: “We’ve been alone too long. Let’s be alone together.”

But in our case, when we invite God into our life, we actually are not alone.

9. The Antidote to Loneliness

Togetherness, bonding with others who are on the same path, who recognize the same struggle is an antidote to loneliness. When kindred spirits gather together for a common purpose, there is a synergy which acts to diminish the pain of our existential loneliness.

So I call upon us to make the Torah that common purpose. Let us get together to learn together – let us open the Torah and discover why this book has been a source of hope and inspiration to so many.

A group of people learning Torah together creates an unbelievable bond. Together we can weaken the stranglehold of existential loneliness. Together we can create unity which is the best way of piercing the veils that conceal God’s presence in this world. God is one and, though we often feel alone, we are not alone; we are at one with Him. Creating human unity reveals the divine unity that is inherently present but concealed in this world.

As you study with like-minded, kindred souls, you will discover how to take the loneliness in the dark moments and channel it. To use it, as Jacob did, proactively – to do something positive with it.

So the next time you feel like you are all alone wrestling with dark forces of the night, remember that you are replaying a scene that took place long ago – when Jacob was alone on a lonely night, wrestling with formidable forces, and despite the difficult struggle and its wounds, he prevailed. And we are here to tell about it today.

You have something unique to contribute to this world, and the very thing that makes you unique is what makes you feel alone. To put the most positive spin on your loneliness is to think of it as a downside of your uniqueness. You are a unique being, created in the divine image, and endowed with unique powers to accomplish your unique mission in this world.

The story of Jacob – struggling alone in the night – is your story and my story. It is our story. It teaches us that we can prevail, but we have to do battle. Others have done this battle before us, and they have prevailed. And this very fact gives us strength and direction and purpose to our mission.

We will not get rid of existential loneliness completely until Moshiach comes, because it is meant to be here, and we are meant to battle with it. But we need not be crippled by it. We can prevail over it.

10. The Loneliness of Israel

Our personal lives are a microcosm of the bigger picture. Just as we deal with our personal challenge of loneliness, Israel, as a nation and a country, faces a similar predicament. As evidenced yet again this week in the UN.

But we should not feel down. Our isolation is also our strength and uniqueness.

Is Israel isolated and alone? Absolutely. And the world should thank us for it! It is due to Israel's aloneness, its singular commitment to God, that we have the values that we cherish today.

A particularly cruel Nazi commander was torturing a Jew, and then pointed a gun to his head. Just as he about to pull the trigger, the Jews asked the Nazi if he could say something. The Nazi granted him his request. The Jew began to whisper a prayer. The Nazi yelled at the Jew: "What are you saying, dirty Jew?" The Jew replied: "I am thanking God."

This infuriated the Nazi. “What are you thanking God for?! You are lying here miserable and wretched, at my mercy. Your God has forsaken you.”

The Jew answered: I am thanking God that he did not create me like you...

So the next time that our friends or foes worry that Israel will be isolated, we say:

You couldn't give us a stronger wake-up call and compliment. Isolation is the story of our lives – it is the spine of our endurance. It is the very purpose of our existence – to be the sole voice of sanity in a crazy world. To stand up alone against all destructive forces. Alone, we stand upright and proud – together as one. And one day we hope you will join us in this singular and unique mission.

Let us mobilize each other in this battle. And may we have the strength to transcend our wounds and heal them as we prevail even over the divine forces that test us. And may we see the unity within our community, within the nation of Israel, and in the entire world. Amen.