



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayishlach

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November 16, 2013
Vayishlach

Chutzpah and Israel



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

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ABSTRACT

If you could ask one thing of God, what should it be?

- 1) Please, God, may no challenges come my way. Or:
- 2) Please, God, may I have the power to overcome any challenges that may come my way.

The answer to which is better can be found in the humbling and heroic story of a Philadelphia Phillies baseball fan who gave his life for his land and his people.

His land is called the Land of Israel, and his people are called the Children of Israel.

Israel – it is one of the most famous words in our vocabulary, a word used far more disproportionately than any other (whether in headlines or our conversations) and yet its meaning remains shrouded in mystery.

Israel – it is more than a word, more than a geographic location, even more than a biological disposition. It is the very essence of who we are and our purpose on this earth. We, the people called Israel, have the power to overcome all and any challenges.

Some 3,500 years ago, our grandfather Jacob wrestled with a challenger, was victorious and was given the name Israel. And ever since, we, his descendants have been given the power to wrestle with any challenger, walking away victorious.

If you think that’s chutzpah, you’re right!

This sermon examines the six meanings of the word “Israel” by which we are called (head, song, directness, prince, individuality, and wrestling) and provides clear directives as to how we can become national heroes and a “light unto the nations.”

CHUTZPAH AND OTHER QUALITIES OF ISRAEL

1. If You Knew What I Have (Joke)

The number 31 Egged bus was packed fuller than a Jew at an-all-you-can-eat buffet. I mean it was packed. And it was hot and sweaty.

A little old lady named Zahavah got on near the Machneh Yehudah shuk, and she stood in front of a seated young girl.

Holding her hand to her chest, the old lady said to the girl, "Listen, if you knew what I have, you would give me your seat."

The girl quickly got up and gave up the seat to the old lady.

The girl then took out a fan and started to fan herself. Zahavah looked up and said, "Young lady, if you knew what I have, you would give me that fan."

The girl gave Zahavah her fan.

A short while later, Zahavah got up and said to the bus driver, "*Nahag*, Driver, stop! I want to get off here."

The bus driver replied that he had to drop her at the next bus stop, not in the middle of the road.

Her hand across her chest, Zahavah declared, "If you knew what I have, you would let me out right here in middle of the street."

The bus driver pulled over and let Zahavah out in middle of honking traffic. As Zahavah was stepping down off the bus, the driver thought to ask:

"*Giveret*, Madam, I'm curious - what is it that you have?"

"What I have," replied Zahavah, "is called chutzpah."

2. Is Real

I would like to talk to you today about chutzpah and about Israel, two words which may actually be synonymous.

Israel – the land, the people – is one of the most famous words in our vocabulary, a word used far more disproportionately to its size than any other in headlines and conversations, and yet its meaning remains shrouded in mystery.

I would like to talk to you both about the geographical Israel (the holy Land of Israel) and the biological Israel (the holy Children of Israel). And I would like to talk to you about the chutzpah of Israel.

Israel, both the land and the people, are well known for their chutzpah. A land, the size of New Jersey, surrounded by a couple hundred million of its sworn enemies, does not survive without a supersized dose of chutzpah.

A people, who have been to hell and back time and again, do not survive for thousands of years – overcoming the greatest challenges, outliving all of its adversities and adversities – without audacity, willpower, daring and courage.

The stories of such courage are many, and one of them in particular – of a young man who was an avid fan of the Philadelphia Phillies – embodies the heroism of Israel as a land and as a people.

3. Story Of Michael Levin

Har Herzl, Mt. Herzl, in Jerusalem is home to the National Military Cemetery for the fallen soldiers, heroes and warriors of the Israeli Defense Forces.

If one ventures to *Azor Daled, Chelka Vav* (Area D, Section 6) of the Mt. Herzl cemetery, one comes across a sight to behold. Amongst the monuments and memorial stones, one stands out – not because it is bigger or different than the others, but because it is covered in paraphernalia from the Major League Baseball team, the Philadelphia Phillies.

Phillies' baseball caps, championship banners, and even a red batting helmet with a flourishing "P" adorn this stone. The sea of Phillies red is punctuated by the blue-and-white of miniature Israeli flags.

This monument is a testament and memorial to a heart-wrenching and heroic story, the story of a young man named Michael Levin.

Michael was born on February 17, 1984 in Holland, Pennsylvania, to Mark and Harriet Levin, and grew up in a traditional Jewish household. In February 2001, Michael went to Israel for two months to participate in a high school program, and his soul was turned on. At the age of 17, he decided he wanted to make Aliyah and join a front-line combat unit in the Israeli Defense Forces. To say this was shocking to his parents – who anticipated Michael going to college like every other normal American teenager – is probably an understatement.

Michael's dream of joining the Israeli army was hampered by a delay in paperwork, which frustrated him greatly as he was unable to even enter the IDF processing facility in Israel without it. But his desire to serve was so strong that he actually went around the rear of the building and climbed up to a second-story bathroom window, in order to gain entrance to officials in charge of the process.

In Israel, service is mandatory. Therefore, the processor who was accustomed to seeing people try to get out of serving was so taken with Michael's zeal that he processed him that day!

Michael's dream was realized; he immigrated to Israel and joined the elite *Tzanchanim* paratrooper unit shortly thereafter.

In the summer of 2006, Michael received leave to travel to the United States to visit his family. During Michael's trip, war broke out in the north of Israel with Lebanon and Hezbollah. While most Americans tourists were fleeing back to the States, Michael ended his home visit early in order to return to Israel to help protect the Holy Land.

Upon his arrival, Michael went straight to his commanders and asked to rejoin his unit. He was initially refused since he was still listed as being on leave, but he persisted, prevailed and rushed to the combat zone.

Seven days later in Ayta ash-Shab, Lebanon, Michael Levin was killed. He was one of three Israeli soldiers who died there on August 1, 2006.

It is Michael's monument, in Area D, Section 6 on Mt. Herzl, which is adorned with the red of the Phillies and the blue-and-white of Israel.

This, my friends, is the story of a hero, a young man who gave up everything – his comforts, his family, his life – to protect his homeland, the Land of Israel, and his people, the Children of Israel.

I heard this story while standing in the blazing sunshine of July on Mt. Herzl. And ever since, I have asked myself these questions:

- What inspiring quality did Michael possess in order to do what he did – to leave comfortable Pennsylvania to fight for Israel?
- Do I have this inspiring quality within me?
- Do we all have this inspiring quality within us?

4. Parshat Vayishlach: Wrestle Mania

One could never know what was going through Michael's heart and soul, through his mind and thoughts, when he decided to do what he did. But I will propose an idea, an idea originating in the Torah – in this week Torah reading, *Parshat Vayishlach*. There it states:

Jacob remained alone. A stranger wrestled with him until just before daybreak. And he [the stranger] said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

And he [the stranger] said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have wrestled with God and with men, and you have prevailed."¹

What was wrong with the name Jacob that it had to be changed to or augmented with the name Israel?² And, for that matter, where did this name Israel come from and what does this name Israel mean?

¹Genesis 32:25, 28-29

²See Talmud Berachot end ch. 1 (13a); Yerushalmi ibid.

Jacob was alone, his family having already crossed the river on their journey to the Holy Land. In the middle of a dark night, Jacob wrestled with a stranger who was an angel. Some say that this angel represented evil,³ others that he represented goodness and spirituality.⁴

Either way, it certainly was a struggle – with Jacob fighting for the very future of his family and the world. For this is what this story represents: He was wrestling with the imperfections of existence, struggling for all future generations, battling with the status quo – be it the physical status quo, or the spiritual status quo.

He was victorious. And, as a result, the angel (and later God) blessed Jacob and changed his name to Israel.

Why the name Israel? Answered the stranger:

“Because you have wrestled (sarisa) with God and with men, and you have prevailed.”

Yisrael, the Hebrew for Israel, shares its root with *sarisa el*, which is most often translated as wrestled or struggled with the divine, but it can also be translated as “mastered.”

In other words, the angel is blessing Jacob with a name Israel, meaning he who has struggled with and wrestled with the divine, and mastered and overcome this challenge.

5. The Very Word

Israel is the single best-known term for the Jewish People – collectively and individually – and the Jewish People’s homeland, the Land of Israel.

And, indeed, the very word Israel teaches us how to harness its depth, for Israel connotes the ability to wrestle with our demons or angels and, not just wrestle, but be victorious.

³ Bereshit Rabbah 77. Rashi on verse. Zohar on verse.

⁴ Targum Yonathan; Tanchuma on verse.

The energy of Israel allows us to understand the mysterious power that drove Michael Levin and so many Jewish heroes (starting with Jacob, the original Israel) to risk and give their very lives to protect it.

So next time you face a challenge, no matter how formidable, remember that your very name, Israel, gives you the power to prevail over any obstacle.

6. The Greatest Gift

Indeed, the name Israel captures the greatest possible gift we can receive.

If you could ask that God give you just one gift, which would it be?

- Please, God, may no challenges come my way. Or:
- Please, God, may I have the power to overcome any challenges that may come my way?

Most people would choose the former. But with a little bit of thought and a little more of maturity, we realize that life and growth require that we successfully confront challenges and demanding situations. Therefore, the greatest blessing is to be Israel – empowered to prevail over any trial.

7. Israel and Its Meanings

The plot thickens.

Although the general name Israel means the ability to struggle and prevail, the word actually has five additional meanings – each expressing a different aspect of what is involved in this effort.

In Hebrew, Israel or Yisrael is spelled *yud, sin, resh, aleph, lamed*.

These five letters, when rearranged, create five different permutations, each shedding light on the infinite ability and potential of the Jewish people as a whole, and each Jew as an individual.

8. Yisrael – Head

The first permutation of Yisrael spells *li rosh* or *l'roshi*, meaning literally “to me a head” or “to my head.”⁵

Read like this, God’s message to Jacob was:

“No longer are you (only) Jacob/Yaakov, meaning a ‘heel.’⁶ Now you are a head to Me, you are at a level where you lead, you are a master that controls the entire body, and ‘a head to Me’ – a head that leads the way to bring the divine into existence.

“To be a Jew is to be a head, to be a thinking individual, a control room for all the elements of existence. Just as the plethora elements of existence are controlled from the control room that is the head, from the hard drive that is the Rosh, so are you, Children of Israel, My Head, a Head to Me.”

The first element of being Israel, wrestling and being victorious over any challenge is being a head of the divine.

9. Yisrael – Song of God

The second permutation of Yisrael that we will consider spells *shir El*, meaning “song of God.”⁷

⁵Cited in Erkei Ha’Kinuim (of the Baal Seder haDoros) erech Rosh, in the section titled Yisrael Li Rosh. See also Shaar HaPesukim Vayishlach 32:29. See Likkutei Torah Shelach 48b. Shir HaShirim 21d.

⁶Genesis 25:26.

⁷Tikkunei Zohar 3a, 25a; Likkutei Torah Shelach 48d.

Kabbalah and Chassidus teaches that we all travel spiritually in life through song, through our song of God. Song is the vehicle upon which our life's journey progresses.

Often times, to many of the world's inhabitants, life is monotonous – devoid of melody, harmony or symphony.

To be a Jew – to be one of the Children of Israel – means to inspire and uplift the world with song ... to play the music the world longs to hear. To bring harmony and symphony to all existence.

Thus, the second element of being Israel, wrestling and being victorious over any challenge, is being a song of God.

10. Yisrael – Straight to God

The third permutation of Yisrael spells *yasher El* meaning “direct to God,” or “straight to God.”⁸

Many times we take detours, back roads and long ways around. Israel means directness, straightness, bluntness and smoothness.

We have a direct line to God, and we never apologize for being right – even if the world wants us to.

The third element of being Israel, wrestling and being victorious over any challenge, is being direct, never wavering, in our approach to God.

11. Yisrael – Prince of God

The fourth permutation of Yisrael spells *sar El*, meaning “prince of God.”⁹

⁸Ramaz beginning of Parshas Shemini. Likkutei Torah Shelach 40c.

⁹Likkutei Torah Re'eh 32b.

Let's be honest: Jews have a complex – Jews think they want to be like the rest of the world.

Says the Torah: To be Israel means to be a prince, a leader, a general. There is no fading into the woodwork, because you are the wood and the work, you are the general and you lead this army into battle, a battle to transform all darkness into light.

The fourth element of being Israel, wrestling and being victorious over any challenge is being a prince, a general, a warrior of God.

12. Yisrael – A Letter

The fifth meaning comes not from a permutation but from an acronym. The letters of the word Yisrael spell out *Yesh Shishim Riboi Otiyot Latorah* – “there are six-hundred-thousand letters in the Torah,”¹⁰ which correspond to the 600,000 root souls that break further down into the spark within every Jewish soul.¹¹

Every Jew has his or her unique letter, which stands for his or her mission in this world. Some of us are meant to fight and protect the Holy Land of Israel with our physical bodies. Others are meant to change the world in a different way. But to be a part of the Children of Israel, means you are a part of a whole, a nation, a people, a land.

Like a letter in a Torah scroll, you are infinitely holy and indispensable, and like a letter you are also part of a greater whole, a collective universal *Sefer Torah*.

The fifth element of being Israel, wrestling and being victorious over any challenge is being a unique “letter,” with your unique mission and calling.

¹⁰ Megaleh Amukos 186. See Likkutei Torah Behar 41b; 43d explaining how this number is derived.

¹¹ Tanya chapter 37.

13. Decisions, Decisions (Joke)

Moshe was traveling back to New York from Tel Aviv on El Al Flight # 613, when the pilot finally turned off the seatbelt sign and the stewardesses began pushing their trolleys up and down the aisles, serving the main in-flight meal.

“Would you like dinner?” a stewardess asked Moshe.

“What are my choices?” he hungrily inquired.

“Yes or no,” she replied.

14. Yes or No

We have many choices in life. But we only have two choices that really matter – yes or no. Will we say “Yes” to any challenge, tackling it head-on? Or will we say “No” to the challenges of life, passing the buck on to someone else?

As the Children of Israel, we don’t know how to say “No” to challenges. We say, “Bring it on, for there is no challenge that we, the Children of Israel, cannot overcome.”

We do not ask God to remove all challenges. That would be nice, but it would be naïve.

We ask God to help us overcome any challenges that may come our way. This is what Israel means and this is what Israel does.

15. To be a Light

In summary, Israel means to lead, to be a hero, to be a light.

The *Shema* – the prayer that is the quintessential statement of Judaism – begins: “Hear O Israel...” but it can also be read as one word – **Hero Israel**.

The plural noun that describes the Children of Israel is Israelites, and it can be broken into two words, Israel Lights. We, the people of Israel, are a nation of heroes and a nation of lights.

Hero Israel, **Israel Light!**

Yes, it takes a certain quality to proclaim such a thing. And we all have this quality. The quality is called chutzpah. Not ordinary chutzpah that is arrogance, but holy chutzpah.

The holy chutzpah to wrestle even with God Himself.

The holy chutzpah to actually win!

Always remember: You are called Israel. This is your unique name, your unique identity. Carry it proudly. It contains the secret to your survival and your ability to overcome any challenge and to thrive!

Shabbat Shalom.