



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## VAYIKRA > Emor

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

---

May 6, 2011

Emor

**Lessons from Bin Laden**



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

VAYIKRA > Emor > Lessons from Bin Laden

May 6, 2011

## **Celebrating Life vs. Celebrating Death; Akeidah vs. Al Qaeda and Other Lessons from Bin Laden**

### **ABSTRACT**

The world froze momentarily upon hearing about this week’s killing of the world’s most famous terrorist, Osama bin Laden.

Debates are raging whether celebrating Bin Laden’s death is in order. Others are asking whether this event has any true significance beyond the symbolic. And what comes next?

But beyond the understandable emotions, what is the bigger story here? What lessons can we derive from the end of this chapter?

A phenomenon of this magnitude – that has captured the attention of billions – must contain important messages for us. What does the Torah teach us about such an event?

This sermon offers four critically relevant lessons for our times, which stand alone and are easily adaptable to various sermon/class formats:

- 1) do we have the right to celebrate the death of our enemy
- 2) how to add passion to our faith and to our lives
- 3) what are the virtues/vices of sacrifice in the name of God; the difference between *mesirat nefesh* and Al Qaeda style martyrdom
- 4) how to see the bigger picture unfolding

Finally, these lessons are linked to this week’s Torah reading, *Emor*, which includes the mitzvah of *mesirat nefesh* (sacrificing your life for God), and negates Bin Laden’s approach to religious conviction. *Emor* teaches us how to forcefully deal with adversity

while becoming more dignified people in the process. It shows us how to balance these two poles: fighting intense hatred, while abiding by our higher values. Celebrating life while others celebrate death. How can we hold onto hope and maintain a vision of a better life when we have to wage war with those that are causing the world so much suffering.

*Note: Because of the compelling nature of Bin Laden's killing, this sermon has a lot more material than you will probably use. It is specifically constructed in a way that different sections stand-alone, so you can easily pick and choose the pieces that you see fit.*

## SPECIAL SERMON: LESSONS FROM BIN LADEN

### 1. Bin Laden's Wall (Joke)

Three men, a Canadian farmer, Osama Bin Laden and Uncle Sam were out walking one day. They come across a magic lamp from which a genie popped out. "I will give each of you one wish, that's three wishes total," said the genie.

The Canadian spoke up first, "I am a farmer, my dad was a farmer, and my son will also farm. I want the land to be forever fertile in Canada." With a blink of the genie's eye, and some smoke - POOF - the land in Canada was forever made fertile for farming.

Osama Bin Laden was amazed, so he said, "I want a wall around my family and my army of holy warriors, so that no infidels, Jews or Americans can come near." Again, with a blink of the genie's eye, and some smoke - POOF - a huge wall was erected around his estate.

"Uncle Sam" (a former civil engineer), asked, "I'm very curious. Please tell me more about this wall."

So the genie explained, "Well, it's about 15,000 feet high, 500 feet thick. It is impenetrable; nothing can get in or out."

"Hmmm," said Uncle Sam, "Fill it with water."

Okay, it didn't take water, but a little fire ...

## 2. After Ten Years

After ten years of the greatest manhunt in history, Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the most devastating attack on American soil in modern times, was killed by U.S. forces in Pakistan. Almost a decade from the day when President Bush declared that we will get him “dead or alive,” the man is now dead at age 54, put to rest at sea, never to be heard from again.

Would you believe it? Ten years have passed since the day that everyone remembers, a day that has become seared into our consciousness as 9/11. Much has transpired in this past decade – many accomplishments and many tragedies – but despite them all, the pallor of 9/11 and the image of the fallen towers has always cast a long shadow which would not go away ... together with the elusive Osama Bin Laden, who remained almost mythically beyond our reach.

Justice has been done, to quote the words of President Obama, and in celebration many Americans have taken to the streets in mass euphoria. Whether you agree with that jubilation or not (more on that later), how can you not feel some vindication and relief over the demise of a man who was responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent men, women and children, and in the process changed the way we live our lives – a man who became the face of terror in the world? I mean, finally, after all the grief and disruption caused by 9/11, we have a bit of closure!

## 3. Questions Remain

But, as the euphoria dies down, and we look beyond the legitimate emotions, we must ask: What is the bigger story here? What lessons can we derive from the end of this chapter? What does the Torah say about such an event? How are we Jews to look at it?

The Baal Shem Tov teaches us that every detail in life is driven by Divine Providence and contains personal and global lessons for us. How much more so, this event – the killing of Bin Laden – a man who led an effort that has disrupted billions of lives, and whose death now has captured the attention of so many billions of people.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to understand that Bin Laden's death does not mark the death of terrorism, nor bring to an end the challenges facing the Arab/Muslim world today and its confrontations with the West..

Indeed, think about the 10 (!) years it took to capture Bin Laden, and the surprising discovery that he was hiding not in some obscure cave in the Afghanistan wilderness, but in a multi-million compound in an affluent community in Pakistan, just a third of a mile away from a military base. All this underscores the thorny complexity of our relationship with the Muslim world, and leads us to ask: Was Pakistan complicit in protecting him? And how many Muslims would prefer Bin Laden over the West (despite publicly deploring his actions)?

#### 4. The Story Is Not Over

What this tells us is that despite the momentary victory that the killing of Osama bin Laden brings, the story is far from over. And it would be wise to glean lessons from this event that will inform us in the future as we shape long term strategies, beyond the current short-lived celebration.

One of the most unique elements of Jewish thought is that even evil offers us life lessons. Perhaps that is one way of redeeming the negative. So, even Osama bin Muhammad bin Awad bin Laden – a person who became the face of global terror and evil, a person who became equated in the American imagination with the likes of Stalin and Hitler (who incidentally was also declared dead on May 1, 66 years ago) – even he can offer us lessons for our own lives that will help us face future challenges.

In the time available to me, I plan to examine just four/three/two/one of them:

- 1) do we have the right to celebrate the death of our enemy or not?
- 2) how to add passion to our faith?
- 3) what are the virtues/vices of sacrifice in the name of God?
- 4) how to see the bigger picture unfolding?

## 5. An American Holiday (Joke)

Let's begin with the right to celebrate.

You must have all heard this joke sometime over the last ten years:

Osama bin Laden, not feeling well and concerned about his mortality, goes to consult a psychic about the date of his death.

Closing her eyes and silently reaching into the realm of the future, she finds the answer: "You will die on an American holiday."

"Which one?" Osama bin Laden asks nervously.

"It doesn't matter," replies the psychic. "Whenever you die, it will be an American holiday!"

## 6. Can We Celebrate?

All joking aside, this issue (whether we have the right to celebrate the fall of an enemy) is addressed in the Book of Proverbs, which states: "When your enemy falls, do not rejoice, and when he stumbles, let your heart not exult, lest God see and be displeased, and turn His wrath away from him."<sup>1</sup>

The Talmud teaches the same lesson with the following story: "When the Egyptians were drowning in the Sea of Reeds, the angels wanted to sing. God said to them, 'The work of My hands is drowning in the sea, and you want to sing?!'"<sup>2</sup>

But then the Book of Proverbs also says, "When the evil perish, there is joyful song."<sup>3</sup> And indeed, though the angels were told not to sing, Moses and the Jewish people raised their voices in song after the parting of the sea, celebrating the death of the drowned Egyptians. And this song has become mainstay of every daily prayer!

How do we reconcile the two approaches?

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 24:17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 39b.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 11:10. See also Sanhedrin 113b.

Commentaries offer different opinions, but the most obvious explanation is simple:

We don't rejoice over the death of anyone. We rejoice over the victory of goodness and justice.

Our hope is that no human being should never come to hurt others, and even if he does, he should repent and mend his ways. But if, after it all, a person continues to kill innocent people and remains a threat, we delight in his demise and, above all, in the fact that good has prevailed.

The Torah, in its infinite sensitivity, is cautioning us not to succumb in the personal indulgence of rejoicing at another's destruction. We are permitted to sing with joy, but only about the fact that good has been vindicated. We are permitted to sing with joy that justice has prevailed. But, at the same time, we must weep that humans can stoop so low, and that we live in a world where people can still kill innocents in the name of convoluted faith.

With that being said, allow me to add one more point:

Some of the jubilation around Bin Laden's death certainly feels shallow and in some circles, even political (Presidential polls; now Democrats feel they can win the White House in the next election). But let's face it: This is America and it has its way of celebrating victory, in ways that often looks, especially in this media age, like a simplistic type of "Cowboys and Indians" battle, or the winning of the Super Bowl. At the same time, is *this* the most important issue to debate now?! Even if one were to argue that some of the celebrating went too far, so what? Just as people grieved a decade ago over a senseless tragedy, give them some slack and allow them to feel some absolution.

On the other hand, this superficiality compels us to look deeper into the lessons of Bin Laden's death, far beyond the hoopla.

## 7. Passionate Faith

We cannot ignore the fact that despite his convoluted and obscene faith, Bin Laden was a man of passion. Passion has great power, and his passion attracted many, especially when compared to the complacency – and often dry and lifeless faith – of the Western world ... Like that of the man who replied to the question: What is worse ignorance or apathy? I don't know and I don't care...

One thing you cannot accuse Osama bin Laden of is apathy.

Born to a billionaire father, a child of privilege and luxury, bin Laden could have easily chosen the comfortable path of indulgence and opulence. Yet, he rejected the powerful connections his family had to the royal Saudi family, and went off into exile, impassioned by the ideology of destroying infidels and conquering the world for Islam.

As misplaced as his beliefs may have been, Bin Laden was a man of passion, and he inspired passion in others. According to all accounts, Bin Laden was a gentle man, and his soldiers have told researchers that meeting him was a deeply spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup> They said he took care to avoid giving offense and to forgive transgressors. And yet, in the name of faith, he engineered the cruel death of many innocent people.

Spiritual passion, even if completely distorted, should never be underestimated. And certainly it is clear that complacency – even the most civil and refined – is no match for it.

What we can learn from Bin Laden is the need for healthy passion in our lives – a passion directed at creating a spiritual revolution that transforms the universe with kindness and empathy.

The violence perpetrated by Bin Laden around the world offers us an unprecedented opportunity to wake ourselves up from complacency and embrace a zealous battle for justice and truth. Not as murderous zealots but as zealots for peace who will rise and defy conventional thinking.

---

<sup>4</sup>See *The Longest War* by Peter Bergen.



## 8. Virtues/Vices of Sacrifice: Al Qaeda vs. Akeidah

In this week's Torah portion<sup>5</sup> we read about the precept, "I shall be sanctified among the children of Israel," which implies the duty to "sanctify the Name" by giving up one's life, if necessary, rather than betray our covenant with G-d.

Some people have asked me about the difference between the Jewish concept of *mesirat nefesh* – literally, "giving one's life for one's faith" – and the suicidal martyrdom worshiped by Bin Laden and his ilk.

The answer is simple, and has several components:

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.<sup>6</sup> In other words, your commitment is unconditional, not optional, but not one that aspires death.

---

<sup>5</sup> 22:32.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Akiva is a classic example of this: He totally dedicated his life to Torah and lived up to his own principle (Berachot 61b): "You shall love God, your Lord, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5) – the words "with all your soul" imply even if one takes your soul." Even when the Romans decreed that teaching Torah is a crime punishable by death, Rabbi Akiva gathered people together and gave public Torah lectures. Before long, Rabbi Akiva was charged and convicted. As the executioners flayed his skin with iron combs, Rabbi Akiva recited the Shema, concentrating on fulfilling its words: to love God "with all your heart, soul, and might." His students questioned him, "Our master! Even to this extent?" Rabbi Akiva responded: "All my life I have been troubled by this verse, 'You shall love God... with all your soul.' As I have explained its meaning: 'all your soul,' even if they take your life. I have always wondered: will I ever have the privilege of fulfilling this mitzvah? And now that the opportunity has finally arrived – shall I not seize it?" With his last breath, he cried out the words of *Shema...Echad*.

Rabbi Akiva was not saying that he aspired to die, God forbid. He knew that God loves life, and commands "you shall live by them and not die by them." He was saying that one's love for God has to be with "all your soul" – so complete and unconditional that your entire soul is invested in it, to the extent that you are committed "even if they take your life." He would have preferred living and fulfilling God's commandments on earth. But now that he has no choice due to the Roman decree, he was not going to compromise his values to save his life.

The Torah advocates love and sanctity of life. “You shall live by them (Torah and its commandments) and not die by them.”<sup>7</sup> Contrast that with Osama bin Laden’s statement in November 2001: “We love death. The US loves life. That is the difference between us two.” Bin Laden evidently missed the verse in Proverbs:<sup>8</sup> “All those who hate me love death.”

The aim of the entire Torah is to bring peace to this world, as it says, “its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace.”<sup>9</sup>

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>10</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 definitely not celebrating with glee over the exploded body parts of a terror victim!

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 [very much unlike Al Qaeda’s beliefs concerning martyrdom].

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.”

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 18:5. Sanhedrin 74a. Rambam, *Mishne Torah*, *Hilchot Yesodei haTorah* 5:1.

<sup>8</sup> 8:36.

<sup>9</sup> Rambam, conclusion of Laws of Chanukah. Proverbs 3:16.

<sup>10</sup> See *Rambam*, *Hilchot Yesodei haTorah* 5:1-4, and commentaries there.

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 Al Qaeda?

Absolutely not!

The dramatic differences are obvious in many ways.

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) Abraham was known for his unconditional love for all people. He put himself on the line to protect anyone in danger. Contrast that with Bin Laden’s violent attacks aimed at killing as many people as possible, while using others to do his dirty work for him. Note that Bin Laden never volunteered for such a suicide mission himself.<sup>11</sup>

In short, Bin Laden reminds 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 a mass murderer like Osama bin Laden, yet in subtle ways we, too, can be guilty of intolerance and abuse of others in the name of faith.

---

<sup>11</sup> Quite the contrary: According to some reports he actually used women as shields to protect himself! Compare that with Professor Liviu Librescu, a Holocaust survivor, who was fatally shot while shielding and saving the lives of his students during the tragic shooting at Virginia Tech in April 2007...

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.

It is also interesting to note that the day of Bin Laden's killing was Day 12 of the *Counting of Omer*, when we focus on refining the attribute of "humility in discipline." The results of discipline and might without humility are obvious. The greatest catastrophes have occurred as a result of people sitting in arrogant judgment of others. Who epitomized this more in our times than Bin Laden and his operatives?

This behooves us to ask ourselves: Am I arrogant in the name of justice (what I consider just)? Do I ever think that I sit on a higher pedestal and bestow judgment on my subjects below? What about my children? Students?

The lesson: Before judging anyone, insure that you are doing so selflessly with no personal bias.

## 9. The Bigger Picture

Finally, and this is perhaps the most important lesson of all: Osama bin Laden (his life and his death) serves as wake up call to us all reminding us of the true nature of the battles at hand.

When we focus on all the havoc and terror that he wreaked, it is easy to neglect the root philosophies and ideas that drove bin Laden and his Al Qaeda followers. But we must not. Indeed, we are told that "my enemies have made me wise."<sup>12</sup>

To truly understand what we must do to counter the forces unleashed by bin Laden and so many of his cohorts, we need to look carefully into their ideology and to the teachings of their mentors.

Here are a few "illuminating" quotes from the man himself:

---

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 119:98.

- “To kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the Holy Mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.” – In Fatwa entitled *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders World Islamic Front Statement*, February 28, 1998
- “The war is between us and the Jews. Any country that steps into the same trench as the Jews has only itself to blame.” – May 2002, from a video released to several news organizations
- “We stress the importance of martyrdom operations against the enemy, these attacks that have scared Americans and Israelis like never before.” – February 2003, from an audiotape obtained by Al-Jazeera
- “Their rejection of Hamas after it had won the election... confirms that there is a Crusader-Zionist war against Muslims.” – April 2006, from an audiotape obtained by Al-Jazeera, referring to the reactions of Israel and Western states after Palestinian elections
- “America is a great power possessed of tremendous military might and a wide-ranging economy, but all this is built on an unstable foundation which can be targeted, with special attention to its obvious weak spots. If America is hit in one hundredth of these weak spots, God willing, it will stumble, wither away and relinquish world leadership.”
- “In today’s wars, there are no morals. We believe the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists are the Americans. We do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets.” – on ABC’s *Nightline*, June 10, 1998
- “America has been hit by Allah at its most vulnerable point, destroying, thank God, its most prestigious buildings.” – October 7, 2001, after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon

- “Jihad will continue even if I am not around.” – late September 2001, in an interview with a Pakistani newspaper.

And now a key quote or two from bin Laden’s key two primary heroes and teachers, Islamic intellectual hero, Sayyid Qutb, one of the philosophical fathers of Muslim fundamentalism today (who was executed by Nasser in 1966), and Abdullah Azzam, whose ideas would provide the underpinnings for Al Qaeda.

Qutb’s extensive corpus of writings advocates the Islamic war against secularism:

- “If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *Jahiliyya* (pagan ignorance of divine guidance), and all the marvelous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance.”
- “It is essential for mankind to have a new leadership ... It is necessary for the new leadership to preserve and develop the material fruits of the creative genius of Europe, and also to provide mankind with such high ideals and values as have so far remained undiscovered by mankind, and which will also acquaint humanity with a way of life which is harmonious with human nature, which is positive and constructive, and which is practicable. Islam is the only system which possesses these values and this way of life.”

Do not be seduced by the ideological tone. Qutb continues with a call for a militant revolution that will, violently if necessary, annihilate the *Jahiliyya*. This is not to suggest that all Muslims feel this way. But make no mistake – the Muslim world is not indifferent to this message. It has deeply held religious beliefs, which are not just going away.

Abdullah Azzam, who became a mentor to the young Bin Laden, advocated similar ideas. Jihad was the responsibility of all Muslims, he taught, until the lands once held by Islam were reclaimed. His motto: “Jihad and the rifle alone – no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogue.”

Azzam built a scholarly, ideological and practical paramilitary infrastructure for the globalization of Islamist movements. His philosophical rationalization of global jihad and practical approach to

recruitment and training of Muslim militants from around the world blossomed during the Afghan war against Soviet occupation and proved crucial to the subsequent development of al-Qaida.

Like Qutb, Azzam urged the creation of a “pioneering vanguard,” as the core of a new Islamic society:

- “This vanguard constitutes the solid base (qaeda in Arabic) for the hoped-for society ... We shall continue the jihad no matter how long the way, until the last breath and the last beat of the pulse, or until we see the Islamic state established.”

This is the radical ideology that shaped Bin Laden’s life and became the driving engine of his fermenting radicalism, which gave birth and continues to give 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 of a task. How will a Western world, complacent with its comforts, ever face the violent passion of thousands, if not millions, of religious zealots?

But listen we must. And now, with Bin Laden’s death, 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.

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 (as Bin Laden reminded us) between Christianity/West/Rome, Islam and Judaism, battles which all trace their roots in Abraham’s home.

Another key piece of the good news is that the Arab/Muslim world has begin rising up – not accidentally just in the last few months – against its own autocratic leaders.

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>13</sup>

## 10. This Week’s Torah Reading

This week’s Torah reading, *Emor*, negates Bin Laden’s approach to religious conviction. It teaches us how to forcefully deal with adversity while becoming greater and more dignified people in the process. It shows us how to balance these two poles: fighting intense hatred and wanton violence on one hand, while abiding by our higher values on the other. How can we hold onto hope and maintain a vision of a better life when we have to battle death and pain, and go to war with those that are causing the world so much suffering.

This week’s Torah reading begins with the words “Speak ... and you shall tell them.” Our sages associate this commandment with the obligation of education. The redundancy – “speak” and “tell them” – informs us, says the Talmud, “to caution the adults concerning the children.”<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew word for “caution” – *lihazhir* – shares the same root as the word *zohar*, meaning “radiance.” Also the word for “speak” is *emor* rather than *dabeir*, because *emor* means to speak softly, kindly.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Habakkuk 2:14 and Isaiah 11:9.

<sup>14</sup> Talmud *Yevamot* 114a. Cited in Rashi’s opening commentary to this week’s portion.

<sup>15</sup> Mechilta, Rashi Exodus 19:3.



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, but do so in a way that radiates the beauties of life.

Discipline is a most necessary component in the education. An unshaped and impressionable child needs direction and guidance to grow into a healthy and virtuous adult. Discipline helps avoid the pitfalls and traps of our own selfishness.

Yet, how often do we witness – 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.

But the Torah clearly tells us – indeed, it actually commands us – to educate our children with radiance and love. Discipline is necessary, but as a dimension in radiance, kindness and love (*gevurah she'bachesed*).

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 till the earth, rip out the weeds, and create a nurturing environment so that the “flower” within each child can blossom.

As it is in the microcosm so is it in the macrocosm – in today's global conflicts.

When people are attacked they naturally respond. And often this response is in kind. We have an ample demonstration of this in America's 10 year manhunt in search of Bin Laden, and in the general war on terrorism against its citizens.

The question is this: Are we fighting a defensive war only to protect ourselves, or are we fighting an offensive war for something we believe in? In other words, are we fighting against or for something?

This week's Torah reading teaches us that if your battle is only against, you will always remain locked in a cycle of violence. Your fear and caution must be coupled with light and illumination, with kindness and gentleness – a deeper embrace of what you truly believe in. And that core belief becomes the foundation that allows you to fight against your enemy, while maintaining sight of your ultimate goal – to radiate light in your own home, community and in the entire world.

### **11. Conclusion (version one)**

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. 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. May this happen speedily in our days. Amen.

### **12. Conclusion (version two)**

Today, we are called to join forces in a fervent effort against any form of extremism and violence, including those perpetrated in the name of religious zealotry. To counter the passion of misguided souls ready to blow up themselves and others, we need to zealously defend and promote the divine principles of justice and peace – and all in the spirit of unity and love fueled by selflessness.

Nations of the world and, communities across the globe need to zealously unite with one powerful message: We will not tolerate or accept any form of violence in the name of God. Religious beliefs must be used not to kill but to promote spiritual values ... to establish laws that respect life and basic human rights and allow for diversity.

We must demand of the Muslim world – and for that matter of the Christian and Jewish world, as well as of all religions and creeds – to embrace the principles established by Abraham, father of all nations, to promote the deepest values of virtue and integrity, and to fight the pagan forces of the universe not with violence, but with light and love. Instead of celebrating death, we need to celebrate life.

The call of our times ought to be: Let us celebrate life. The sanctity of each and every person's life on this globe, regardless of background, creed or faith. God placed each one of us on this earth, and by virtue of that, every single life is sacred and indispenable.

And on a personal level, we must counter the forces of "baseless hatred" that tears apart communities with unconditional love. By fostering and intensifying unity and peace – *shalom* – we will eliminate the cause that destroyed the Temple, and bring on the final redemption. May this happen speedily, in our days. Amen.