



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Toldot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 22, 2014

Toldot

Massacre in the House of God



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Talleitim, snow-white prayer shawls, symbols of purity and innocence, soaked red in the blood of holy worshippers. *Tefillin* meant to bind heart and mind together as one with God, lie still, unmoving next to the still, unmoving bodies of those sacred souls who wore them.

The collective family of Israel sits *shiva*, mourning for our holy brothers. There is nothing to say. May the Omnipresent comfort all of us among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. May God avenge the blood of His holy ones. Blessed is the True Judge.

It happened early Tuesday morning in a center of Jewish study and prayer in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof. Prayer and study, the best of what Judaism has to offer, the pure nucleus of Judaism, was desecrated by evil.

Two unnamable savages, wielding meat cleavers and a gun, brought their sick darkness into that holy place.

This is not Nazi Germany of 70 years ago. This is not a pogrom of 150 years ago. This is not the Inquisition of 600 years ago. This is not the Roman occupation of 2,000 years ago. This is not the Babylonian invasion of 2,500 years ago. And this is not Egyptian domination of 3,400 years ago. This, my dear brothers and sisters, is Israel today. *Shachrit* morning service in a synagogue in Israel today – it is unfathomable, it doesn't make any sense!

Shachrit, a morning service, has turned into *shiva*, a mourning service.

What can we do?

MASSACRE IN THE HOUSE OF GOD

1. From Morning Service to Mourning Service

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2. Every Jew a Temple

Every Jew is a temple, a sanctuary, a place where the Divine Image resides. Sometimes we allow the meaningless pettiness of the world to get in the way, but in our hearts of hearts, in our souls of souls, we know who we are and what we stand for.

Three times a day, in our prayer services, we stand in our sanctuaries and in our synagogues, and we remind ourselves of the purpose and meaning of what it is to be a Jew.

This is what all of us here are doing today, on this Shabbat. We wrap ourselves in the purity and innocence of devotion and worship to remind ourselves of our mission as Jews, our mission to be holy sanctuaries to the world.

Every morning, we wrap ourselves in our prayer shawls, don our *tefillin*, open our mouths and our hearts, and we weave ourselves as one with the Master of the Universe.

It is regarding these synagogues of ours, our houses of worship, our *shuls*, our *Batei Midrashim* and our *Batei Knesiyot*, that the Torah says: *How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!*¹

It is an utter horror – unfathomable, unbearable – when evil desecrates a holy place such as this. For these tents of Jacob, these houses of Torah study and divine worship are meant to protect us from such things! These places are meant to be safe-havens for our bodies and souls! How can this be? How can a pure *tallit* ever be soaked in blood? How can a pair of *tefillin* be torn apart? How can a holy Jew – a *chelek Eloka m'maal mamash*, a literal piece of God Himself – be butchered by the hand of darkness?

3. No Answer

We have no answer. There is no answer. There never should be an answer. An answer justifies such unjustifiable evil.

We have no answer but we can have a response. We can respond by highlighting what we are, who we are, and why we are as a people. We respond by building what our enemy wants to destroy: Our faith,

¹ Numbers 24:5.

our commitment, our city of Jerusalem, our synagogues, our houses of worship and study (which are a *mikdash m'at*, “mini sanctuaries”). Though this is no answer, it is the quintessential Jewish response, something we can do – that which has kept our nation eternally alive and unvanquishable.

By stressing in bold letters who we are as Jews, what we represent as God’s ambassadors, and what our houses of prayer and academies of study symbolize, we can and must respond to the evil of our murderous foes.

With the help of God, this will give us strength to stand up from our collective *shiva* and show the world that no matter how much you hate us, we shall ultimately destroy your toxicity and transform all of your death into God’s promise of life.

4. Congregation of Jacob

The synagogue in which the slain were praying the morning service is called *Kehilat Yaakov*, the Congregation of Jacob. It is part of a large Jewish complex, containing a study hall, synagogues and social hall.

As we read in our Torah portion, our grandfather Jacob, from whom sprung the general congregation of Jacob – i.e. all of Israel – spent a great deal of time, praying and studying in just such a place in his day.

The first documented complex of Torah study and Jewish prayer, like the one in Har Nof, was the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, established some 4,000 years ago, first in Jerusalem, then later in Beer Sheva.² Shem was the son of Noah and Ever was Shem’s grandson. Ever was the great-great-great-great-grandfather of Abraham. Thus, nine generations before Abraham’s birth, Shem had already established the first place of divine academia and Godly worship.

² See Maharsha to Megillah 17a.

Today, the yeshiva is pretty ubiquitous. It comes in all shapes and sizes, with differing philosophies and academic methods. Rabbi Moshe Twerski, one of those murdered in his *tallit* and *tefillin*, was a Rosh (head of a) Yeshiva – he was the grandson of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, a great Torah scholar, scion of Yeshiva University, and a descendant of the Twerski dynasty of Chassidic masters and yeshiva scholars.

The yeshiva is the cocoon, the space of pure innocence where one goes to hone one's soul, mind, and connection with God. As the building in Har Nof exemplifies, the houses of Jewish worship and scholarship go hand-in-hand: they are two sides of the same coin in serving God, studying and connecting with His divine wisdom as contained in the Torah.

The first such yeshiva, the first such pure cocoon was the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever.

5. Our Torah Portion

In our Torah portion we read that Rebecca was pregnant with twins. One would be Jacob, the father of all of us and after whom *Kehilat Yaakov* is named, while the other twin would be Esau.

The Torah tells us that while in their mother's womb, the babies struggled mightily.

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi,³ cites the Midrash⁴ that whenever pregnant Rebecca passed by the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, Jacob would struggle to come out of her womb, and when she passed the entrance of a temple of idolatry, Esau would struggle to come out.

Later, after the twins were born, this is what happened:

And the youths grew up, and Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents.⁵

³ On Genesis 25:22.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 63:6.

⁵ Genesis 25:27.

Once again Rashi explains that the word *tents* here refers to the tents of Shem and Ever.⁶ When Esau was hunting in the fields, Jacob was studying and praying in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever.

Additionally, later on in Genesis, when we discuss Jacob's love for his son Joseph,⁷ Rashi states that whatever Jacob had learned at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever he taught to Joseph.⁸

Jacob had studied in history's first yeshiva, the yeshiva that would set the template for all future yeshivas, the yeshiva that teaches us what such innocent cocoons of purity are all about.

Though this will not ease our pain (and may in fact make it more acute), this knowledge should help us better understand our role in this world and perhaps why evil is so bent on destroying us, and why it always has been.

I mean really, what possible problem could the world have with a few Jews, who simply want to live, pray, study, and serve God? Perhaps by understanding the original yeshiva, we can also understand the motives of our enemies.

So what was the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever?

6. Book of Formation

The Midrash relates⁹ that, in the beginning process of creating the world, God initially composed a book called *Sefer Yetzira*, the "Book of Formation." God then looked in this book and formed the world. When God concluded the creation process, God took the *Sefer Yetzira* and put it into the Torah. Later he showed the *Sefer Yetzira* to Abraham.

⁶ Gen. Rabbah 63:10

⁷ Genesis 37:3.

⁸ Genesis Rabbah 84:8.

⁹ See Otzar Midrashim, Pesikta, p. 487.

Abraham could not understand a single word of it, couldn't begin to understand how the world was formed or how to transform worlds. As he pondered, a heavenly voice called out and said, "Would you like your mind to resemble My mind? You will never be able to understand Me by yourself. Go to Shem and Ever." So Abraham went to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever and enrolled there for three years, until he understood the "Book of Formation" of the world.¹⁰

What did he come to understand?

That God formed the world with a plan – for light to vanquish darkness, for purity to overcome impurity, for holiness to dispel evil.

We Jews are born into this world for this sole – and soul – purpose. This is why we go to yeshiva, study, pray, don *talleitim* and *tefillin*: to connect with our inner purity and innocence, so that we can bring the whole universe to its purpose of purity and innocence. It is no easy task and, to help us, we have tents of Jacob, the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever and every yeshiva since, places to understand our role and the "Book of Formation" – how to transform worlds.

Indeed, by Divine Providence, over this Shabbat, the *Kinnus Hasheluchim Haolami*, the annual International Conference of Chabad Emissaries is taking place in New York. This is a gathering of thousands of people who have dedicated their lives completely to this purpose.

And we are reminded that six years ago, almost to the day, evil tried to snuff out goodness and light at the Chabad House in Mumbai, India. And how can we forget that the same year as the attack in Mumbai, there was a vicious attack on the Jerusalem yeshiva known as Mercaz HaRav. In that massacre six yeshiva students were killed and a dozen more seriously wounded.

We Jews represent Godliness in the world and ungodly people cannot stand it.

¹⁰ See also Toldot Yaakov Yosef on Vayeitzei (p. 80) where it compares the fourteen years of Jacob's studying in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever to the thirteen years of Rashbi in the cave, both studying the hidden divine mysteries of existence.

7. Our Role

Evil – and there is always evil – can never stand our illuminated role. It always tries to stamp us out, for we are the cure to its cancer, we are the candle to its darkness.

We, as Jews, carry with us the secrets to existence – why and how God formed the universe. There are those that would kill us for it. They want us not on the Temple Mount (*Beit Hamikdash*) and not in any micro-temple (*Mikdash M'at*). Our mere existence undermines their falsehoods.

They are willing (and even eager) to walk into our sanctuaries, our yeshivas and places of holiness to try to spill our blood and snuff us out.

It is not going to happen.

We are here to teach the world what it means to be holy. Every Jew knows this; only some of us are not yet comfortable with this mission. Not yet.

But this evil reminds us of how pressing and immediate our goals of redemption are. We cannot relax for a second. We must turn the whole world into a sanctuary of prayer, Torah study, and divinity.

Shem and Ever established these spaces of holiness and sanctuary more than 4,000 years ago; Jacob studied there and passed on the tradition and knowledge; it is up to us to continue on and complete this unbreakable chain.

May God avenge the blood of our holy ones only as God can. And may we avenge their blood only as we can – by dispelling all darkness and evil, and by permeating this earth with holiness and light.

8. In Conclusion: What We Can Do

In such a dire time, there must be a takeaway message, something practical and actionable that we can do today (and tomorrow) to combat such evil.

We must build that which our enemy wishes to destroy. For every gruesome murder – for every terrorist attack – we must build an even stronger Jerusalem, both physically and spiritually.

As a rabbi, as a representative of this community, I call on us all to declare a spiritual war of Torah and mitzvot. To reinforce and build our spiritual inner microcosmic Jerusalem and our mini-sanctuaries (*mikdash m'at*).

As these lives were torn from us during prayer in shul, let each of us make a commitment here and now to intensify our synagogue attendance and prayers. Commit to coming more often and to inspire others as well to attend.

[If appropriate:] Let us do everything possible to build/expand our synagogue and school.

As these souls were ripped away as they were wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, let us all commit to intensify our fulfillment of these mitzvot.

Every mitzvah is an act of light dispelling darkness. But there are certain mitzvot that have divine protection against enemies – such as, affixing a mezuzah to the door, giving tzedakah generously, donning *tefillin*.

In the merit of the holy martyrs who were slaughtered while the unity of God was proclaimed in the *tefillin* bound to their arms and foreheads, may every single one of us in this room commit to donning the *tefillin* every day, and if we already do, commit to encouraging and inspiring a friend, a co-worker, a family member, anybody and everybody to don the *tefillin*.

May we adorn our doorposts with holy mezuzot, thereby proclaiming that this edifice is dedicated as a sanctuary for God. The mezuzah simply and sweetly says: God resides here.

And tzedakah – which is not only giving charity, but also includes acts of righteousness and kindness. Tzedakah proclaims loud and clear: we Jews are here to change the world, to bring righteousness into the equation, to dispel the selfish darkness with our selfless light.

One final thing: twenty-four children were orphaned by this evil. In times of crisis Jews always gathered the children together and had them recite verses, say prayers and give charity.

Let us now gather our children both at home as well as in assemblies and rallies, where we recite Torah verses together, pray together, and give tzedakah together.

As King David writes in the Book of Psalms: *Mepi oililm v'yonkim yosadeto oiz l'hashbis oyev u'misnakem* – “*Out of the mouth of babes and infants You have established Your might – to answer those who deny You, to silence the enemy and the vengeful.*”¹¹

Besides all the other benefits in doing this, your children will forever remember that we Jews do not retreat in times of challenge. We stand up with pride and embrace our faith and our traditions.

Let us close with the wisdom of children. The Midrash relates¹² that when Haman, the evil Persian minister succeeded in having the king sign the decree to annihilate the Jews, Mordechai went out and stopped three young yeshiva students coming out of school and asked them to quote to him from what they had learned that day. Haman and his cohorts followed along to hear what the children would say. And this is what they said:

Said one: “Do not fear sudden terror, nor the destruction of the wicked when it comes.”¹³

Said the second: “Contrive a scheme, but it will be foiled; conspire a plot but it will not materialize; for God is with us.”¹⁴

¹¹ Tehilim 8:3.

¹² Esther Rabba 7:16.

¹³ Proverbs 3:25.

¹⁴ Isaiah 8:10.

And said the third [quoting God]: “Even to your old age I am with you; even to your elderly years will I sustain you; I have made you, and I will bear you; I will sustain and deliver you.”¹⁵

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹⁵ Isaiah 46:4.