



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayitzei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 29, 2014
Vayitzei

**Can A Jewish State Be
Democratic?**



Meaningful Sermons

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeitzei > Can A Jewish State Be Democratic?

November 29, 2014

ABSTRACT

What does the confluence of Thanksgiving, the “Jewish State” bill, and the events in Ferguson, Missouri, teach us about democracy?

Thanksgiving commemorates the beginning of a new, democratic way of life in a new land. And – while some pundits cite the recent events in Ferguson to demonstrate that democracy’s footing in America is still rather unstable – overall, nobody would deny that the United States has succeeded at becoming a fairly free nation with liberty for all.

There has been recent talk that Israel is not.

This has to do with the current discussion in Israel regarding the proposed “Jewish State” bill that seeks to emphasize the Jewishness of the State of Israel. Predictably, the bill has been perceived by the U.S. State Department (and *The New York Times*) as an attack on democracy.

If Israel were defined as a Jewish State then this would seem to compromise its purely democratic status. Conversely, if Israel were a pure democracy, then, over time, there would be a great possibility of the Jew becoming the minority within Israel and then what would ensure the Jewishness of the state?

Another question arises: What makes a state Jewish? If every single Jew on the face of the planet lived in the Holy Land – protected by a powerful army, shielded from any harm – would this really be the result we are looking for? How could 14 million Jews possibly get along in one land?

What does the Torah say?

Genesis

Vayeitzei

Can A Jewish State Be Democratic?

CAN A JEWISH STATE BE DEMOCRATIC?

1. Undemocratic Quips (Humor)

Winston Churchill once quipped: “The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.”

I’ve also heard it said that the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy is that a dictatorship is the exploitation of man by man, while a democracy is the reverse.

2. Thanksgiving and Democracy

Thanksgiving, which took place this past Thursday, annually commemorates the beginning of a new, democratic way of life in a new land. It took awhile for the democracy to get its footing in America – and some pundits cite the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, to show that it is still rather unstable – but, overall, the United States has succeeded at becoming a fairly free nation with liberty for all.

There has been recent talk that Israel is not.

This has to do with the current discussion in Israel regarding the proposed “Jewish State” bill that seeks to emphasize the Jewishness of the State of Israel. Predictably, this bill has been perceived as an attack on democracy.

The U.S. State Department issued a statement that it “would expect any final legislation to continue Israel’s commitment to democratic principles.” And in an editorial titled, “Israel Narrows Its Democracy,” *The New York Times* opined:

“It is heartbreaking to see the Israeli cabinet approve a contentious bill that would officially define Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, reserving ‘national rights’ only for Jews.”

The *Times* then went on to suggest that such a bill would be comparable to the corrosive affects that the “the systematic denial of full rights to minorities, principally African Americans,” had on the democracy of the United States.

The editorial board concluded:

“Having experienced the grievous legacies created when a government diminishes the rights of its people, we know this is not the path that Israel should take.”¹

3. The Two Sides of the Argument

Both sides of the argument seem to have merit. If Israel were defined as a Jewish State then it would seem to compromise its purely democratic status, ensuring that Jews are the majority, that the leadership remains Jewish, that the values remain Jewish. Conversely, if Israel were to remain a pure democracy, then, overtime, there would be a great possibility of the Jew becoming the minority, and then what would ensure the Jewishness of the state?

But an even bigger question looms: What makes a state Jewish? The people, the ideology, the philosophy? Is Israel today a Jewish state per se? Is Israel Jewish because the majority of its people are Jewish? Or perhaps Israel is Jewish because Israel represents Jewish ideas, ideals, and hopes?

One thing that is certain, the idea of a religious state scares the living daylights out of people. They wonder: What is the difference between an Islamic State and a Jewish State? Democracy is meant to mitigate church dominations of the past. With the thousands of years spent under the persecutions of state religions, the Jew should know better than anyone that a religious state can only lead down a path of inequality and persecution.

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/opinion/israel-narrows-its-democracy.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=c-column-top-span-region®ion=c-column-top-span-region&WT.nav=c-column-top-span-region&r=0>.

This is the argument of the rational world, as eloquently editorialized in the *New York Times*.

And then, let's consider this: What would happen if Israel was a Jewish State, with every single Jew on the face of the planet living in the Holy Land? Let's say all 14 million of us were well-protected by a powerful army, shielded from any harm – would this really be the result we are looking for? Would 14 million Jews get along in one land?

Everything happens by Divine Providence. The confluence of Thanksgiving, the “Jewish State” bill, and the events in Ferguson (not to mention the usual expressions of Islamic extremism) seem to be telling us that it is time to look at this from a different angle.

So let's ask: What does the Torah say?

4. The Torah View

As a rabbi, who works from a unique set of documents, I would like to offer a bit of a different view on this whole subject. It, as always, is predicated upon the Torah.

Say you had a large family, twelve children, hundreds of grandchildren, thousands of great-grandchildren, and ultimately millions of descendants – would you rather your offspring be dispersed throughout the world or united all together in the same neighborhood? Which of these two options would you deem healthier for their security and development?

Is it better for the Jewish people to be condensed into one location or extended throughout the world?

This isn't a theoretical question, but a very practical one, one that will shed light on this issue of democracy, the Jewish State, and liberty in general.

In this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Vayeitzei*, Jacob has the famous dream of a ladder, upon which he sees angels descending and ascending. Before Jacob awakens from this dream, God tells him that his seed will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, and:

And you shall spread (u'faratzta) westward and eastward and northward and southward; and through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth and through your seed.

This seems to imply spreading out is a good thing. This also seems to suggest that all the peoples of earth shall be blessed through Jacob and the family of Israel.

The word *u'faratzta* is a unique one. It implies expansion. But more so, it implies expansion with regard to a pre-existing structure² – that is, taking the status quo of what one has, breaking its boundaries, transcending its limitations, and expanding and extending it outward.

What is this blessing of God to Jacob teaching us?

5. The Talmud's Answer

The Talmud³ has an interesting answer:

Whoever delights in the Shabbat is given a portion without borders, as it is written, *Then, you shall delight with the Lord, and I will cause you to ride on the high places of the Land, and I will give you to eat from the heritage of Jacob your father...*⁴ Unlike Abraham, regarding whom it's written, *Rise, walk in the Land, to its length...*⁵ Nor like Isaac, regarding whom is written, *For to you and to your seed will I give all these lands.*⁶ Only like Jacob, regarding whom it is written, *And you shall spread (u'faratzta) westward and eastward and northward and southward.*

² See Likkutei Sichot vol. 1, pp. 167.

³ Shabbat 118a-b.

⁴ Isaiah 58:14.

⁵ Genesis 13:17.

⁶ Genesis 26:3.

The language used with regard to Abraham and Isaac is one of defined borders. God defines the length and width of the Land to Abraham. God also specifies which lands He will give to Isaac. But with Jacob, God states: *And you shall spread (u'faratzta) westward and eastward and northward and southward*, an expansion without borders, definitions, or parameters.

Most things in life have a predictable pattern and defined parameters. But then there are those few things that transcend borders. Israel is one of them. Israel is not defined by its borders, but by its transcendent nature. The difficulties occur when we see Israel *only* as a geographic place.

Of course, Israel is a geographic place on the map – it is the Land promised to the Jewish people by God – but it is much more than that.

From this unique place, the ideals given by God to Israel, the Children of Jacob, are meant to spread outward to the east, west, north and south.⁷ And by this spreading of the divine ideals that are contained in the Torah, all the families of the world shall be blessed.

This is what a Jewish state is all about. It is not a political state; it is a state of being, a state of spreading the divine ideals that have been carried for thousands of years by Jews, who often – nay, usually – had to risk their lives just so that these Godly ideals would be maintained and perpetuated.

These Godly ideals are the foundation of freedom and democracy.

6. Democracy According to Torah

Democracy – the concept that all people are created in the Divine Image and all have inalienable rights – is not a human invention. Its origins are found in the Torah.

⁷ As it says (Isaiah 2:3): From Zion will go out Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem.

It is a fact of the founding of the United States of America that its grounding principles were all taken from the Hebrew Bible. But even with this great achievement, America has its limitations.

For instance, the Constitution of the United States of America only allows a natural born citizen to become President of the country. If someone immigrated to the US, even as a newborn, that someone is prohibited from becoming President.

Israel, in this sense, is more democratic. Israel does allow immigrants to become Prime Minister. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, was born in Poland, and Golda Meir, Israel's fourth Prime Minister, was born in Russia and grew up in Wisconsin. She was also a woman. And, as we well know, the United States has never had a woman as its top leader.

A true Jewish state is the bellwether for democracies everywhere.

The problem with the U.S. State Department and the Editorial Board of *The New York Times* is that they project their guilty consciences upon Israel and the Jewish people. Just because America persecuted people based on race – not allowing full civil rights to African Americans – doesn't mean Israel will do the same to its minorities.

7. The Big Difference

This, too, is the big difference between a so-called "religious" state such as ISIS and the Jewish State of Israel. Jewish ideals are the underpinnings, inspiration, and origins of every democracy everywhere. When the world was slaughtering people wholesale, the people of Israel preached the sanctity and dignity of human life. They preached peace, justice and equality under the law, when these ideals were a joke in the world around them.

It is indeed a *chutzpah* for anyone to now come preach to the Jew on the nuances of the values we all hold dear – the values the Jew taught to the world.

As a matter of fact, when Israel does truly become a Jewish state – as defined by the guidelines of the Jewish book, the Torah – then it will be the single most liberating place on the face of the planet. As it is, Israel is the only place on earth that feeds its enemies and force-feeds them life and dignity (which they promptly throw back in Israel's face).

I think the world is afraid of what Israel stands for. Because along with that comes a spiritual component, a divine factor that no one wants to address and which everyone would rather ignore.

This is what the Talmud is saying, *Whoever delights in the Shabbat is given a portion without borders*. When you define Shabbat as delight and pleasure, when you realize and acknowledge the divine in creation and reality, then you transcend boundaries and limitations. Then Israel is not a geo-political nightmare but a geo-spiritual dream.

The whole purpose of Israel, of the Children of Jacob, is to expand, to spread forth the light of God, the light of truth to the east, to the west, the north and the south.

We fulfill this purpose when we live up to Torah ideals and show the world how the Jewish “state of being” is truly the state of liberty, freedom and divinity.

This is why God gave us a seemingly counterintuitive blessing. The only way for us to be unbreakable and one is not if we all huddle together in one ghetto or one shtetl and try to shelter ourselves from the winds of antagonism. The only way to be a united family is to spread our wings, to open our arms eastward, westward, north and south – and show humanity what a divine ideal truly looks like.

8. Jewish State of Affairs (Conclusion)

At the end of the day, the onus is upon us. When the world sees what it is that a Jew truly stands for, then the world will be blessed – through the family of Israel will be blessed all the families of the earth.

If, for whatever reason, the world does not see, or chooses not to see the reality of the Jews – what we bring to the table and what the Jewish state (aka the state of the Jew) truly is – then we must double our efforts to demonstrate what it is that we stand for. We must knock down every boundary, we must overcome every limitation, we must spread our ideals outward and upward in our service of the Creator, in our Torah and its commandments.

Fascinatingly, the more we spread our ideals outward, the stronger our core nucleus becomes. The great 11th century, Rashi, interprets the term *u'faratzta* as meaning “to strengthen.” This suggests that the more we expand the mightier we become, the wider we spread our wings the higher we fly.

May it truly be that we, the Children of Jacob, the Nation of Israel, shall truly spread the ideals of the Torah to the farthest reaches of the globe – eastward, westward, northward, and southward – and thus may all the families of the world be blessed by the family that is ours. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!