



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayishlach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 20, 2010
Vayishlach

Two Sermons

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Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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Enter the Heart”

Bereishit > Vayishlach > Thanksgiving

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ABSTRACT

Thanksgiving – this coming week – is a time when many Americans have the custom to visit their families. For some it is clearly a very heartwarming and nostalgic experience. But many others dread the holidays. They are terrified of revisiting a place that never felt like home, a place where a smiling veneer masked much pain. Whether it was due to their parents’ unhappy marriages, insecurities or other dysfunctions, for many people home simply did not feel like home.

Some don’t even have a clue what a home is supposed to feel like ... or how it might feel to be in a place where everyone is not constantly judged or criticized, in a place where everyone is loved and accepted unconditionally.

This sermon discusses, from a Torah perspective, the nature and importance of a true home – as also emphasized in this week’s Torah reading where Jacob “builds himself a home”¹ – a comfortable, nurturing environment, where you can just kick off your shoes and be yourself, and find safety from a hostile world. For, if you don’t feel secure within, how can you find security outside?

The presence of a true home affects every step of our lives, and the Torah teaches us how we can build such a home now, even if we never knew it in our childhood. As for those of us who did grow up in good homes, these insights can only make us appreciate the gift we were given and help us cultivate even better homes for our families.

¹ Genesis 33:17.

THANKSGIVING: WHEN HOME DOESN'T FEEL LIKE HOME**1. A Time to Say Thank You**

Thanksgiving, though not a Jewish holiday *per se*, is very much in the spirit of the Jewish tradition. A central theme of the Torah is simple *menstchlekeit*, and a part of that is simple courtesy, saying thank you to other human beings and to God.

We find many expressions of gratitude throughout the Torah – thanksgiving offerings, blessings and prayers. Indeed, we could say that every Jewish holiday has an aspect of Thanksgiving to it. For example, the Passover Seder is all about thanking God for the miracle of taking us out of Egypt. At Sukkot we thank God for the protection of the Clouds of Glory while we wandered for forty years in the desert.

So the spirit of Thanksgiving has been with us long before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock and saw these strange creatures running about called turkeys, which ever since then have dreaded the day.

Asked to write a composition on the subject, “What I’m thankful for on Thanksgiving,” even little Timothy wrote, “I am thankful that I’m not a turkey.”

The modern Thanksgiving – besides being a day hated by all turkeys – is the beginning of the holiday shopping season. But that is not what it started as being. Initially, it was a day of humility. The pilgrims remembered their rough start in the New World and thanked God for the bounty they had come to enjoy. How many successful people today remember their humble beginnings and all the people – and God – who helped them on their road to success? Remembering that – setting aside the inflated ego of the self-made man – was what Thanksgiving was initially all about and should be still.

Of course, when we are thanking those who helped get us started, how can we forget our parents? Surely, we owe them the most.

Indeed, it is a custom in America, on Thanksgiving day to visit one’s parents and share a festive meal. For some this is a beautiful experience,

a reunion with family and old friends. But for others it is an experience they dread.

2. Thanksgiving Jokes

The dread of Thanksgiving is so common that it has spawned many jokes. Here is one about parents who cannot get their kids to come for Thanksgiving.

-A father, who lives in Phoenix calls his son in New York and says, "I hate to ruin your Thanksgiving, but I have to tell you that your mother and I are divorcing; forty-five years of misery is enough.

-“Pop, what are you talking about?” the son screams.

-“We can’t stand the sight of each other any longer,” the father says. “We’re sick of each other, and I’m sick of talking about this, so you call your sister in Chicago and tell her.”

-Frantic, the son calls his sister, who explodes on the phone. “Like heck they’re getting divorced,” she shouts, “I’ll take care of this.”

-She calls Phoenix immediately, and screams at her father, “You are NOT getting divorced. Don’t do a single thing until I get there. I’m calling my brother back, and we’ll both be there tomorrow. Until then, don’t do a thing, DO YOU HEAR ME?” and hangs up.

-The old man hangs up his phone and turns to his wife. “Okay,” he says, “they’re coming for Thanksgiving and paying their own way.”

Here is some cynical advice of how to liven up an unbearable Thanksgiving meal:

- When everyone goes around saying what they are thankful for, say, “I’m thankful I didn’t get caught” and refuse to say anything more.

- Bring a date that only talks about the tragic and abusive conditions known to exist at turkey farms.
- During mid-meal turn to mom and say, “See mom, I told you they wouldn’t notice that the turkey was past expiration date. You were worried for nothing.”

3. Why the Dread

The reason many people dread these Thanksgiving get-togethers is that their homes are not places where they feel comfortable.

One young man confided in a colleague of mine: “I hate this time of the year, because I have to go home and be reminded of the hypocrisy that was going on in our abusive and dysfunctional family. My father was a tyrant whom we all feared. But on Thanksgiving he would force us kids to pose for pictures and smack us if we didn’t smile. Every year that I am forced to go back for Thanksgiving, I relive all that when he takes out his camera.”

My colleague urged this young man not to go. He said to him, “You are a part of the dysfunction if you do nothing about it, if you don’t even protest by your absence.”

As it happened, the young man heeded that advice and, by voicing his protests for the first time, began a healing process that allowed him to return later but no longer as his father’s victim.

As he realized, the dysfunction in the family centered around one way of acting in the home while putting on a false front to the outside world. All the family members bought into that until he had the courage to challenge the masquerade.

4. A False World

Indeed, the masquerade is a symptom of this world, which the Kabbalah calls *olam sheker*, “the world of lies.” By using this term, the Kabbalah is not implying that everyone in this world is a deceitful liar. Rather, it is

saying that because in this world God and truth is concealed – and the very fact of His existence is so obscured – the truth of His Presence cannot shine.

When the great Hassidic Master known as the Rashab was a small child, he came crying to his grandfather the Tzemach Tzedek, because he had read that God appeared to Abraham, and he didn't understand why God had not appeared to him.² His grandfather replied, "When a man circumcises himself at age 99, then he is worthy that God should appear to him."

Yet, there was more to the child's tears – I mean, how many children today (or for that matter adults) cry because they cannot see God. He was crying because he realized we live in a world that is not aligned with its purpose.

Let me explain that by way of a metaphor. For example, if you buy a new appliance, in order to operate it properly, you read the owner's manual and you follow directions. If you don't do that, the machine is likely to break.

The same is true of the world. Its owner's manual is the Torah, but how many of us are following its directions. If we are not, parts of our lives are broken or at the very least misaligned.

5. Missing Mission Statement (Optional)

Another way to understand this:

If our life is not aligned with its purpose, we are like a business without a mission statement.

Now, some people don't believe there is a purpose to life; they think the world is ruled by random forces and the toughest survive. But even those who *do* believe that there is a purpose, still are coasting along without a plan as to how they will fulfill that purpose.

Oh sure, many of us say that we are meant to change the world for the

² The Rashab was Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber (1866-1920). His grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, was Rabbi Menachem Mendel (1789-1866).

better or that we are meant to marry and raise a good family, but if that's the extent of our mission statement, we are missing the key parts. Imagine a business writing a mission statement that says its purpose is to make money and show a profit. That would be laughable. Of course, every business wants to make money, but the mission statement is meant to spell out *how specifically*. For example, Google's mission statement is to organize all public information and make it available worldwide. Microsoft's mission statement is to put a computer in every home and every office, and to do that they have to create software that makes the computer indispensable.

Same for us. If we want to raise a good family or change the world for the better, we must know *how specifically* we plan to accomplish this. If we don't, we will be functioning poorly and inefficiently, and may never reach our goal.

If we don't, the machine of our life is misaligned and in danger of breaking. Indeed, if we are functioning out of alignment, there are plenty of signs to tell us that we are. Undoubtedly we feel anxious, which is one way the soul has of voicing its discontent.

6. Why Are We Here?

Before we can get our lives back into alignment, we have to know why we are here – what is our purpose in this world? Once we answer that question, we can formulate a mission statement that is aligned with our purpose and smoothly proceed on our life's journey.

Judaism's answer to why we are here is – to put it in a nutshell – to create a home for the Divine in this world. To transform this “world of lies” into a home for God, who is by definition “truth.”³

In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses to instruct the people: “Build for Me a Sanctuary and I shall dwell among them.”⁴

Note that God does not say “Build for me a Sanctuary and I shall dwell *in it.*” God did not intend to dwell in a home of bricks and mortar, but

³ See Jeremiah 10:10. Jerusalem Talmud *Sanhedrin* 1:1. Midrash *Devorim Rabba* 1:10. *Shir HaShirim Rabba* 1 (9:1).

⁴ Exodus 25:8.

rather in our hearts and souls.⁵ And this is our purpose in life – to build a home for the Divine.

To use the terminology of physics, our purpose is to fuse matter with energy. Matter represents the physical/material and energy the spiritual. Matter is the body, energy is the soul. In making a home for the Divine we fuse matter and energy, so that they are perfectly aligned and no longer working at cross-purposes with one another.

The soul seeks to connect us to our source in God; the body is selfishly interested in material comfort. When we teach our body to be less selfishly oriented, to be sensitive to others, to see other people as part of one organism, one universe, rather than apart and competing with us, then we have accomplished this goal. And then God can dwell among us.

7. House is Not a Home

But how can we build a home for the Divine, if we grew up in a dysfunctional home? If we do not know what a home is suppose to be?

We may have grown up in a mansion, but it may never have been a home. What makes a home after all?

A home is where you can be your natural yourself. It is where you are accepted for who you are and where you are loved unconditionally. In the world outside, you can never really be yourself completely. When you meet new people, you have to hold back, learn if you can trust them, before showing more of the real you.

But at home – if it is a true home – you can be yourself all the time.

When a home is like that, when it is a safe place, a child growing up within its confines can learn to trust, can build his or her confidence, develop a sense of inner security – all the tools needed to confront the hostile world outside. And certainly the mission of the parents is to create such an environment, such a home.

⁵ See Reishit Chochma *Shaloh Shaar haAhava* ch. 6. Shaloh 69a.

A colleague of mine tells the following story. Two married childless people – though the owners of several cats and dogs – came to him to advice whether or not they should have a child? “Why in the world not?” he asked, being a family man himself. “Well,” they said, “it is quite expensive.” The wife was an accountant, and she had crunched all the numbers. So much for missed work time. So much for diapers. So much for kindergarten. The way she figured, it would cost \$2 million by the time the child grew to adulthood, and the investment would only begin to yield a return when the child reached the age 36. As far as the numbers – and she – were concerned, it did not look good.

My colleague kept his counsel. Instead, he invited them to be Shabbat guests in the home of a religious family with more than a dozen children. They accepted, not knowing what he was going to spring on them. When they walked in the door, they noticed that many of children looked alike. “Are they cousins?” they asked, only to learn that these children were all brothers and sisters.

Heavens to Betsy!

Was this religious family related to the Rothschilds? Clearly not. And yet even though they did not have anywhere near \$2 million to spend per child, still everyone seemed happy and well adjusted.

The end of this story is that this couple threw their calculation into the trash, and today they have six children and a wonderful home. They came to realize that a home is a not a business – where investment and return rule – rather, it is a haven for souls to grow and flourish.

8. Womb-like Environment

A home is an environment that is as close to the womb as possible. It is a place where the children float around in a secure environment, completely protected and nourished.

A baby in the womb is a miniature universe. When the universe was first created, it was created in embryonic fluid – in water – and then God separated water from water, the oceans from the heavens.⁶

The idea of being immersed in water is a very important Torah reference. Indeed, this idea is embedded in the very name of Moses, which means “drawn from water.” The greatest prophet who spoke to God “face to face” was given his name, *Moshe*, not by his holy parents, but by a gentile woman who was the daughter of the Pharaoh, the Hitler of his time.⁷ And this became the name by which the Torah identifies him.

In every case, the Torah uses the names of the true personality – the soul – of the individual. And the soul of Moses came from a high source – from a place of water.

This place of water is a place of no words ... because it is a place of the sub-conscious, a place of thought alone, a place not defined or limited by words. And this is why the greatest communicator in history – whose every word we study and analyze and learn from today – was a person who could not speak well. When God wanted to choose him as the leader of the Jewish people, he repeatedly demurred, because (as he said) “I am not a man of words ... I find it difficult to speak and find the right words.”⁸

Now why would God choose such a person for a leader? Because Moses came from a place where words are inadequate. Moses’s soul came from that nurturing place and that’s is why he was able to build the Sanctuary for God – a home for God.

How did God know that? God noticed that Moses took the trouble to search for and carry on his back a thirsty little lamb who had strayed from the flock while looking for water. Because of this, God declared that Moses would lead a nation.⁹

Why? Because Moses was a nurturer. If, alone in the wilderness, he took the time and effort to nurture this little lamb, he could be counted on to nurture an entire people.

⁶Genesis 1:1-8.

⁷Exodus 2:10.

⁸Exodus 4:10.

⁹*Shemot Rabba* 2:2.

9. The Importance of Nurture

If you were raised in a nurturing home, you are blessed. The security and the unconditional love are a foundation that will remain with you for the rest of the life.

But many of us have not been raised in such a home. Many of us have been denied nurturing as children. And yet, our personal depravation does not prevent us from creating nurturing homes for our children where they can feel protected, warm and secure, from hostile outside forces.

The Torah teaches us how to do this with the example of Noah. Noah built an ark to protect him and his family from the raging waters of the flood.

“Why an ark?” asks the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement. Specifically, the Baal Shem Tov is questioning the Torah’s use of the word *teiva*, which we translate as “ark.” There are so many other words in Hebrew for boat – *oniah*, *sefinah* – but the Torah uses the word *teiva* which, coincidentally or not coincidentally, also means “word.”

When we are assaulted by a raging storm – in the form of personal anxiety – we can find security in the ark, in the word, in the Torah. The holy words of Torah and of prayer are like a boat, they protect and lift us up so we can sail above the flood waters.

10. Balancing the Worlds

We need the holy words of Torah to sail above the world, so that we do not drown in it. The physical materialistic world seduces us, makes constant demands upon us, and it is hard not to be overwhelmed by its allures.

In Hassidic literature, a story is told about a businessman who kept careful accounts month by month. At the end of the year, when he prepared his annual audit, he balanced all his monthly ledgers, but when it came to the grand total, he simply wrote, “There is nothing by God.” This

way he reminded himself that nothing material is truly significant – only God matters.

One might ask: Why didn't he write that every month? Because he was an ethical businessman, and as such, he had to keep books. But when it came to summing it all up, he knew who was the sum-total of all – God.

In this way, he successfully balanced not just his ledgers, but two worlds – the physical/material and the spiritual.

This is the Jewish way. Judaism does not preach asceticism; it does not think positively of withdrawing from the world and living on nuts and berries like a hermit. Judaism engages the universe. But it does so in a balanced way.

We are meant to refine the universe, make it a better place, while never becoming consumed by it or enslaved by it. *Refining* is the key word. And this is what it means to fuse matter into energy, to align the physical with the spiritual. This is what it means to make a home for the Divine down here on earth.

Our model in this quest is Joseph. He was the first of the biblical great who was not a shepherd, communing with God in nature. Joseph was thrown into the business world, when – through no design of his own – he was elevated to be the grand vizier of Egypt. He knew how to manage and stockpile grain, and he saved just about all of the Middle East from famine, thus making Egypt into the superpower of his day. But even though he was immersed in material dealings – and doing so in the midst of a corrupt and degenerate nation – he still maintained his integrity and his connection to God.

It is noteworthy that Joseph lost his home – his secure nest in the loving embrace of his father – when his brothers sold him into slavery. Yet Joseph did not collapse in resignation. Instead, he made the best of it, and he build an oasis (never forgetting God and his purpose) where he found himself.

This is the Jewish way. A Jew does not wring his hands over a calamity. And Jew does not fret, asking “What will be? What will be?” A Jew says, “What are we going to do about it?”

After the Holocaust, after the death of 6 million – a third of the entire Jewish people! – after unbelievable horror and destruction, Jews did not crowd into trauma clinics. Instead, they rolled up their sleeves and rebuilt. Today, we are experiencing a renaissance of Jewish life because Jews did not give up after the Nation of Israel was nearly annihilated.

How could they do it? Such strength can only come from a reservoir of hope and strength. Such strength can only come from deep faith. And it is this faith that keeps us going forward – it our legacy and our power.

11. Life Begins Now

We each have the power to build a home, where we and our children feel secure. We have that power even if we have never known such a home as children.

And to do build such a home for a family, we must begin by building a home for our own soul – a true home where our soul feels comfortable, no matter how hostile the surroundings.

We each have a divine soul, created in the image of God, and we are meant to nurture, protect and reveal the beauty of this soul.

To give our soul the chance to express itself – so it does not atrophy as a bound and gagged prisoner of our body – we must create for it a secure and nurturing environment – a safe haven, a home.

So, let's begin now. Let's refine a corner of the universe that was given to us and turn it into a home for our soul and the other souls in our care. Let's make our small corner into a place where all who enter feel comfortable and complete.

And if we succeed in this, then we can unite our little corner with the corners refined by like-minded kindred spirits, and the cumulative force will turn the world into a divine home – where God will dwell.

This Thanksgiving, if we are privileged to welcome children and friends into our home, let us make sure that it is a true home that embraces and nurtures. But if we must travel to a place that is not a home, let us have

the strength to transcend our wounds and pass our tests. All the while remembering that what ultimately matters is the home that we create for our soul and for God.

And let us be grateful to God for the gift of a soul that He has given us, for the gift of the Torah that guides us, and for the indomitable strength of the spirit that is our eternal heritage. And let us say thank you for that gift. Amen.



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ABSTRACT

Existential loneliness – which challenges all human beings – is this feeling that says to you that, ultimately, you are alone. You might have a loving spouse and family, be surrounded by nurturing and supportive friends and community. Yet at the core of your being, you feel that there is a part of you that cannot totally connect with anyone else, a part of you that exists inside, apart and alone.

Each one of us has that sense of a lonely place inside. And a longing to fill it. But it seems that no matter what we do, the feeling persists.

Some 3600 years ago a lonely man fought a mysterious battle, and the world has never been the same since. His story teaches us that, while the struggle with loneliness is part of life, it is possible to prevail. In fact, you are never really alone and victory is guaranteed.

This sermon dissects Jacob’s dark night as he wrestled with a stranger, and applies it to our lonely travels through our lifetimes, offering hope, inspiration and a solution which lies in revealing unity that is inherently present but concealed in this world.

THE WRESTLING SOUL: HOW TO DEAL WITH LONELINESS

1. Existential Loneliness

Philosophy and psychology discuss a concept called “existential loneliness” which, many thinkers feel, lies at the root of most of our existential problems.

Existential loneliness is this feeling that says to you that, ultimately, you are alone. You might have a loving spouse and family, be surrounded by nurturing and supportive friends and community. Yet at the core of your being, you feel that there is a part of you that cannot totally connect with anyone else, a part of you 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.

2. The Torah as Blueprint (optional)

Contrary to common belief, the Torah is not just a book of laws and ancient history. Yes, it does contain laws. And yes, it does relate some

historical events. But above all, as the *Midrash* and *Zohar* put it,¹ the Torah is a blueprint of existence. An even more apt metaphor might be a genome map – if you want to know the workings of life at the micro (DNA) level, look at the genome map called the Torah.

So the Torah is not just a book of stories about events on earth – these stories are the tip of the iceberg. Under their surface level lie deep truths of what makes us human beings and the entire universe tick. And understanding this – understanding what lies beneath the surface, what lies at the core level – is essential if we are to lead meaningful, fulfilled lives.

Some of it we do understand already. For example, we know from psychology that various behaviors have sub-conscious motivators. And we know from physiology that various physical phenomena have underlying psychological causes. Take tears. No intelligent person will say that tears precede sadness. We all understand that it is the *inner* emotional sadness that leads to tears – it is the inner sadness that causes a physiological effect which, in turn, causes the tear ducts to produce drops of water. So when we see a teardrop, we understand that the person must be sad.

Thus, it's clear that feelings are generated inside us, yet we can only perceive them in others from the outside in – from tears, smiles and other body language. What is going on inside the person, if it does not manifest itself on the surface, remains hidden.

This we all know about ourselves – we don't need scientists or physicists or rabbis to tell it to us. But what we might not realize is that each one of us is a micro universe.² And, what happens to us, happens to the universe at large. Is not rain, the universe crying?

This is what the mystics tell us. Rain (just like tears) is reflective of a spiritual energy – of some kind of universal sadness. In some ways this is obvious. The rainy season comes in the fall, when days grow shorter, when the sun is farther from the earth, when vegetation withers in preparation for the death of winter (a time when the earth is covered with the shroud of snow).

¹ Midrash *Bereishit Rabba* 1:2. *Zohar* I, 134a.

² Midrash *Tanchuma*, *Pekudei* 3.

By the way, speaking of rain:

- Who is it that everybody listens to but nobody believes? The weatherman.
- What is a Mexican weather report? Chilli today, hot tamale.
- If a farmer raises wheat in dry weather, what does he raise in wet weather? An umbrella.
- Why do mother kangaroos hate rainy days? Because then the children have to play inside.

The cycles of weather and nature, the mystics say, are surface indicators that beneath the sub-atomic level of the universe there is another, spiritual level. And to understand that spiritual level, to understand that level of energy, we need the Torah, which is the blueprint of existence, or the genome map of existence.

So what does the Torah tell us about existential loneliness, and what solution does it offer to this problem?

3. The Lonely Night

Indeed, in this week's reading, the Torah takes up the problem of the vulnerability of life and the resulting loneliness within the context of Jacob's story.

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.”³

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.

4. The Jacob in Each of Us

To begin with, each character in the Torah is an archetype of a personality. Abraham represents *chessed* or loving-kindness, Isaac represents *gevurah* or discipline, Jacob represents *tiferet* or beauty/balance. Note that the Torah tells us the details of their lives only on a “need to know” basis. It is only interested in giving us the key elements that pertain [to the blueprint of existence,] to what is relevant to us – here and now.

For example, it begins the story of Abraham when he is already 75 years old, leaving out his entire childhood and most of his adulthood. As far as the Torah is concerned, the first relevant event in Abraham’s life is God’s command to him, “Go to yourself,”⁴ a command which applies to each one of us.

This is because Abraham is an archetype, and as such he exists in all of us. We also have Isaac inside us, and Moses and even Pharaoh – all the biblical characters, the heroes as well as the villains.

In this week’s Torah reading, we see the Jacob inside of us. A human alone. A human who wrestles with a stranger. A human who prevails and walks away, injured but blessed.

³ Genesis 32:25-29.

⁴ Genesis 12:1.

5. The Story of a Soul

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.

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.

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.

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. 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

⁸See Genesis 27:22.

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.⁹

Because of him, we the Jewish people *know* that nothing can prevail over us – no pogrom, no holocaust, no intifada. Oh yes, we feel the pain. 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."

⁹When the "stranger" touched/struck Jacob's hip socket, "he touched the righteous men and women, the prophets and the prophetesses, that will spring from him [Jacob] in the future, specifically in the generation of the Roman persecution after the Temple's destruction (*Bereishis Rabba* 77:3). Jacob's wound is a collective scar resulting from all the battles of history. As Nachmanides explains: This episode refers to all the suffering and persecutions that the children of Jacob would endure at the hands of the children of Esau. Despite their horrible suffering and deep wounds, they would prevail. Even the wounds that they would endure would ultimately heal in the final redemption (Ramban 32:25. *Chinuch Mitzvah* 3).

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 – alone on the other side of the river – 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, 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.

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.