



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Acharon Shel Pesach

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April 2, 2013

Pesach

**Can You Be a Dreamer
and a Realist?**



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

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and a Realist? Peace at Home; Peace on Earth

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ABSTRACT

The last day of Passover captures one of the most unique and amazing qualities of the Jewish people: Their ability to be both dreamers and realists. To kiss the sky and hold their heads above the clouds, while their feet are firmly planted on the ground.

In today’s Haftorah we read the incredible prophecy of Isaiah: “[At that time] the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the beast of prey shall feed together with a little child to herd them.”

Is this a nice, poetic metaphor or is this something that is actually going to happen someday? And if so, will it happen as a result of a miracle, or are we meant to play a role in this unfolding drama and bring it about?

Judaism teaches us the latter. But then the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question arises: How?

The Jewish answer is simple but profound: By bringing peace into our own lives.

Everything in the universe – in the great macrocosm – reflects what happens on the individual level, in the smallest microcosm. So what happens in our homes affects what happens in our community, in our country, in the world. And therefore, making sure that peace dwells within our walls – *shalom bayit* – is the most important pre-requisite for world peace and for making Isaiah’s prophecies come true.

This sermon sets forth some key, and practical, lessons for changing our homes, and thereby changing the world.

Yizkor captures this theme as well – the power of earthly humans to touch and connect with souls in heaven, while building for them living structures on earth. Yizkor allows us to continue effecting *shalom bayit* even with departed souls.

All this teaches us – that heaven meets earth right at your doorstep.

CAN YOU BE A DREAMER AND A REALIST?

PEACE AT HOME; PEACE ON EARTH

1. A Convert's Story

I'd like to begin by telling you how one woman became a convert to Judaism.

She was visiting Israel for the first time and, as tourists are wont to do, she stopped at the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are exhibited.

In the center of the dimmed room is a round glass chamber displaying the entire Scroll of Isaiah. As she was circling the exhibit, she overheard an Israeli tour guide telling some bored foreign tourists that this was the only scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls that was recovered whole and totally undamaged. When he ended his lecture and gave his group some time to explore on their own, she went up to him and asked: "Why? Why, do you think, the Scroll of Isaiah was the only one recovered undamaged?"

He had a quick answer: "Because of chapter two. Because what it says in chapter two."

Immediately she went to read chapter two, and it so affected her that from that moment she took steps which eventually led to conversion.

This is what she read:

In the days to come, the mountain of God's house shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills. And all the nations shall stream to it. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of God, to the House of the God of Jacob – that He may instruct us in His ways, that we may walk in His paths." And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore ...¹

2. A Fantastic Prophecy

It is a fantastic prophecy. A vision of utopia. Of world peace and brotherhood of man.

Indeed, this very prophecy – or the last part of it – is inscribed on a wall (known as the Isaiah Wall) opposite the United Nations building in New York.

Because this is what we are all working toward.

And, as hard as it is to imagine that it might some day come true, it is nevertheless within the realm of our imagination. Nations *could* forge lasting treaties. Nations *could* destroy their nuclear arsenals, melt down their weapons and turn all the money that goes to defense toward ending world hunger.

It *could* happen.

But Isaiah has even more fantastic things to say. And these things could *not* happen without the natural order being totally turned upside down:

[At that time] the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the beast of prey shall feed together with a little child to herd them.²

¹ Isaiah 2:3-4.

² Isaiah 11:6.

3. Stranger Than Fiction (Humor)

Can't imagine it? Well, it already did happen (sort of).

A story is told that, during the heyday of his prosperity and prominence, P. T. Barnum, the great circus master, had under his tents a very wonderful collection of animals. They had been assembled from all climes and all countries. There was the lion, the leopard, the tiger, the bear, the wolf, the fox and many others. This unique animal family also numbered among its members a fine, woolly lamb.

One day a group of distinguished visitors came to the circus. It was an important group and Barnum himself acted as an escort through the menagerie. Naturally, the animal family was exhibited with high pride. This family represented the finest of the animal kingdom and the results of the highest animal education. Here was proof of what human skill and kindness could accomplish with even the most belligerent of beasts. And cause them to dwell in peace.

Of course there was one skeptic among the distinguished visitors. And he decided to put Mr. Barnum to the test, so he inquired just how long the animals had lived together in such harmony. "Three years," replied Mr. Barnum. The man was not convinced. "Do you mean to tell me that that lamb has been a member of this family all this time?" he demanded.

Mr. Barnum hesitated a moment, then said with a smile, "Of course, you realize that we are obliged to renew the lamb from time to time."

So truth is not stranger than fiction after all. But Isaiah was talking about the real thing.

4. Today's Haftarah

And the second part of his fantastic prophecy is what we read today as part of the Haftarah for the last day of Passover.

Just so we don't dismiss it as a mere poetic metaphor, we have the commentary of the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, who reiterates the message at the conclusion of his magnum opus:

At that time, there will be no famine, no war, no envy, no strife ... The entire world will be entirely occupied with acquiring knowledge of God. As it says [in the prophecy of Isaiah], "The world will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."³

Still it is hard to imagine. Is this something that is *actually* going to happen someday? And if so, will it happen as a result of a miracle, or are we meant to play a role in this unfolding drama and bring it about?

Judaism teaches us the latter. But then the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question arises: How?

5. The Jewish Answer

The Jewish answer is simple but profound: By bringing peace into our own lives.

And here we see how Judaism fuses heaven and earth – the most sublime dreams of a better world, gazing with our eyes toward heaven, while keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground.

We don't just talk about world peace, and the wolf dwelling with the lamb; we do something about it.

Everything in the universe – in the great macrocosm – reflects what happens on the individual level, in the smallest microcosm.⁴ So what happens in our homes affects what happens in our community, in our country, in the world. Like the butterfly effect, every act in our personal domain ripples through the universe.

Therefore, making sure that peace dwells within our walls⁵ is the most important pre-requisite for world peace and for making Isaiah's prophecies come true.

³ Maimonides, conclusion of Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 12:5, quoting Isaiah 11:9. See also Habakkuk 2:14.

⁴ And this is why our sages taught: "Save one life; save the world." (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 37a)

⁵ "May there be peace within your walls and serenity within your gates" (Psalms 122:7).

So each one of us must ask:

“Do I truly feel peace in my home? Am I doing everything possible to build a healthy, harmonious family and household? Do guests feel comfortable when they visit? And, above all, would God feel welcome in my home?”

6. Home as Center of Life

Our homes must be the center of our lives or they will inevitably start to feel like a liability and a burden. Our work may be important and necessary for survival, but the workplace is not our home. Neither is the restaurant where we eat, the museum we visit, or the foreign city we might travel to.

Many people today have replaced their homes with their careers or hobbies – perhaps because they, as children, never had comfortable homes, or because their parents put their careers and personal interests before home and family.

Indeed, they might ask: Why should my home be the center of my life when there are so many exciting things to do and learn?

Because, in order to fully enjoy anything in life, you must feel entirely comfortable with yourself, and you learn to be this way at home, free from the distractions and struggles of the outside world.

What does it mean to be comfortable with yourself? It means being comfortable with your soul, the Godliness within you. It means that the *outer* you, the part that deals with the material world, is at peace with the *inner* you, the real you.

When you radiate the real you from within, you warm your entire home, filling it with a peace and gentleness that will be felt by all those who enter in.

But, say, you don't have it. How do you go about building a healthy, harmonious and peaceful home?⁶

⁶The following advice comes from *Toward the Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe*, chapter 9.

7. Two Essential Elements

There are several important elements that go into building a peaceful home life. Today we shall discuss the essential two: 1) relationships between family members, and 2) the atmosphere of the home itself.

The tone of the relationships within the family is set by the parents – how they love and respect each other, how they go about their daily activities, how they communicate. A husband and wife must make their relationship their highest priority. They must spend time together – enjoying each other’s company and having meaningful talks. Yes, they must share the household and financial responsibilities, but they must also share *themselves* – the personal and philosophical issues that are important to them.

And, of course, the parents must make time for meaningful relationships with their children.

Even when parents genuinely love their children, they may have trouble forging the type of relationships that will shape their children’s lives and values. The reason can be obvious. For example, when a family’s most important discussions concern where to take a vacation or what size television set to buy, a family will naturally grow apart. This is a product both of our materialistic society and of our inherent self-interest.

When every member of a family is concerned primarily with himself or herself, the family itself is bound to suffer. When the father stays late at the office, when the mother is wrapped up in her job or community work, when the children care mainly about parties or school projects, they cannot maintain profound relationships within the family. They may sleep under the same roof and eat at the same table, yet be worlds apart.

When a family shares principles and values, though, they grow together. The home becomes a foundation for the family’s shared sense of purpose, while providing a springboard for each member to pursue his or her own goals.

In such homes, family members stay up late talking heart-to-heart about what's on their minds. Children crowd around grandparents to hear stories. Teenagers debate meaningful issues with each other and with their parents. The whole family gets together – and not just on holidays – for evenings of songs, games, and reminiscing. The home becomes *alive*, a source of energy and hope, of urgency and love. It is not the quietude of a home that makes it peaceful; it is the life within.

8. The Atmosphere

The second essential element of a harmonious home is its atmosphere. A home must be warm and inviting for both the family and its visitors. Think about how displaced you feel when you are traveling, separated from all the things you know and the people you love. Your home should be a place where any guest can feel at peace.

A true home is more than simply a house. A healthy family dynamic, of course, is the key ingredient in making a beautiful home, but the physical environment is also important – it reflects the spirit of the home.

This does not mean that you must have a large house filled with expensive furnishings, only that the furnishings should reflect the spirit of your family. A museum might have the most beautiful furnishings imaginable, but you would hardly want to live there.

The ultimate beauty in a home is its emotional and spiritual warmth. There are many ways to beautify your home spiritually, to invite God into your home. For example, you can place a charity box in each room. Or, talk with your family about God and the responsibilities of all good-hearted people. Or, invite guests into your home and allow it to be used as a place of study and prayer. Or, hold charitable functions or community meetings.

These are the things that make your house a true home – and they cost far less than expensive furniture or the latest flat-screen television set.

Think how children will react to such an atmosphere. They will grow up to remember their home as a place of warmth and kindness, where people felt comfortable to gather and talk about things that mattered to them. In all likelihood, these children will grow into adults who will create the same sort of home.

9. Problem Solving

What happens when problems arise in the home?

Even in a home where the entire family is trying its best, there are bound to be problems. Each one must be handled with an eye toward both a short-term and a long-term solution, for the immediate problem is often an indicator of deeper trouble. Whenever a problem arises, particularly a serious one, the parents need to examine the dynamic of their relationship, and ask themselves if they are communicating with each other in a healthy way.

It is important to remember that children's misbehavior is often the result of parental attitudes to each other. Without changing these attitudes, the parents cannot hope for any serious change in their children.

The parents must look beyond their own egos when dealing with their children. Only then can they truly assess the problem at hand and decide how to fix it.

A parent must not get into a battle with a child. In any relationship between an older person and a younger person – whether it is a parent and child or teacher and student – the responsibility to communicate always lies with the older person, the one with more experience and knowledge.

And that person must ask himself or herself: Did I try hard enough to get my message across? Did I speak from the heart? Do I need to find a new way of talking, a new perspective?

10. Outside Advice

When problems arise, it is often wise to seek the help of someone outside our family, someone who can judge the problem objectively and who understands our goals and values. We must also look for the root of a problem; otherwise, we will never really understand what went wrong.

It is important to realize that nobody gets lost in the woods in one minute. We may go off the path a bit and then, instead of retracing our steps, veer off a little further. A day goes by, and then two days and five. Suddenly, we are very far from where we began. But no matter how far we may have wandered, we can always return, for our soul always yearns to reconnect with God.

Experience has shown that teenagers, especially today, are more likely to accept guidance from older friends and relatives than from their parents. Perhaps they feel that their parents are too determined to impose authority, or too quick to think of them as immature. This is yet another reason for building a welcoming home where friends and relatives feel comfortable in stopping by and where they can offer support and advice to the children who are thirsty for the advice of an older person.

Above all, love is the most powerful tool with which to battle problems. Yes, a healthy home must be run with discipline, but even that discipline must contain love. This cannot be manufactured or superficial, for children are most sensitive to honest emotions.

11. One Father's Method (Inspirational Story)

I want to tell you a story how one father disciplined his wayward son. The father later perished in the Holocaust and the story is related by his son, Leibel Zisman, in his memoir, *I Believe*, as follows:

Only once in my life did my father spank me. On this occasion, I got it into the *gingie* head of mine to break all the windows on Vilna Gass [in Kovno]. This was a street of shops, and all the shops had small

basement windows at the level of my shoe. I kicked one, and it broke; the tinkling glass made a nice sound. So I proceeded like this right on down the street.

Naturally, there was an uproar, and my father was informed that a red-headed boy (there was only one who fit that description) had broken all the windows. I well remember how angry he was – which was a rare sight. I knew by then that my father was a good and patient man, but you better not cross him – he was fierce when he was angry.

On this occasion he said to me, “I am not going to punish you now, because I am too angry, and the Torah teaches that we should never rebuke anyone in anger. But I want you to know that you should never in your life hurt another person or that person’s property. Never!” That was it.

Two days later, he called me in again, and he said, “Now I am no longer angry at you, so I will punish you. I love you and I don’t want to punish you, but you must be punished for what you did.” And then he spanked me.

That was my Tatte.

Children will understand, remember and integrate any lessons that are administered with love. They will react with pure joy when they receive the genuine love of their parents, and they will reciprocate. As is written in Proverbs, “Just as a face is reflected in water, so too a heart is reflected in a heart.”⁷

12. Passover and the Home

The way we run our homes and our families is the way we impact the world around us. Harmony at home – *shalom bayit* – generates harmonious energy that impacts the world.

⁷ Proverbs 27:19.

As Maimonides, Rambam, concludes his Laws of Chanukah

If [a person has the opportunity to fulfill only one of two mitzvot,] lighting a lamp for one's home [i.e., Sabbath candles] or lighting a Chanukah lamp - or, alternatively, lighting a lamp for one's home or reciting kiddush - the lamp for one's home receives priority, since it generates peace within the home.

[Peace is of primary importance, as reflected by the mitzvah requiring] God's name to be blotted out to create peace between a husband and his wife.⁸ Peace is great, for the entire Torah was given to bring about peace within the world,⁹ as stated:¹⁰ "Its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace."

This is why Passover - which concludes with today's Haftarah about creating a peaceful world - focuses on the home and family: We gather and celebrate the Seder and all the festive meals with our families, children ask questions, parents answer, everyone contributes, each in their own way - all demonstrating the model for tranquility and harmony.

This "peace at home" in turn transmits the energy of *shalom* - completeness and harmony - throughout the world.

13. Yizkor: Harmony with the Souls of Our Loved Ones

The Yizkor prayer we recite today captures this theme as well: The ability to create *shalom bayit* - harmony of your family and home - even with the souls of family members that have traveled on.

⁸ The Rambam is referring to the process of testing a *sotah*, a woman suspected of committing adultery. A curse against her containing God's name is written on a scroll. The text is rubbed out in water, and the water is given to the woman to drink. If she indeed committed adultery, she will die (see Numbers 5:11-31; *Hilchot Sotah* 3:8-10).

⁹ See Talmud, Gittin 59b.

¹⁰ Proverbs 3:17.

Imagine: Those of us whose loved ones have passed on have the power and the ability to touch their souls. To connect with them, to perpetuate their legacies on earth and to build something in their name.

One would think that after death the story is over, God forbid. Our loved one has moved on to another world – a world of spirit, which is completely removed and detached from our material universe. After all, we are corporeal creatures, souls within bodies, and we relate seemingly to other souls only as they manifest in physical bodies.

Isn't it fantastic and unrealistic to think that we can connect with souls that are no longer on this material plane?!

Comes Yizkor and reminds us: We Jews are dreamers but we are also realists. Yizkor, just like today's Haftarah, captures one of the most unique and amazing qualities of the Jewish people: Our ability to kiss the sky and hold our heads above the clouds, while our feet are firmly planted on the ground.

And thus we humans can indeed connect with the souls of our loved ones in heaven, wherever they may be, while building for them living structures on earth.

By perpetuating their legacies we become their "bodies," their arms and legs. By establishing an institution or project in their name that helps people, we create for them living "containers" for their souls.

When you think about it, connecting this way with the souls of our loved ones is astounding: It's one thing to build *shalom bayit*, a harmonious home on earth, a family infused with love and tranquility. But can we actually continue to do that with those of our family members that are no longer living in our physical homes, having moved on to their spiritual abodes?

This question concerns in particular those of us that wonder whether we can resolve a rift that we may have had with a parent or family member once their souls have passed on?

Yizkor declares an unequivocal yes! If we apply ourselves, we have the ability to connect and speak with these souls, and actually so something for them to keep their existence alive on earth, by giving charity on their behalf and doing good deeds in their spirit, in addition to saying kaddish and elevating the soul of a parent.¹¹

14. The Challenge

So this is the challenge before us as we leave the holy week of Passover and return to our everyday lives: To live spiritual lives in this material world. To appreciate that we are not physical beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a physical journey. To always keep our sights gazing upward to heaven, while keeping our feet on the ground.

To remember that we can indeed achieve the great dream of world peace, but the world begins at home.

It is an awesome challenge with awesome repercussions. For, when we manage to achieve peace in our personal lives and within our families, then we have the power to refine the world and bring peace to all of mankind.

So when we see more violence around us, we need to remember that it is telling us that we must do something. The world will not be at peace until we finish the work we need to do – each one of us in our homes.

Death, violence, terrorism will continue to haunt us as long as we do not repair the problems at the root.

To repair the world we must begin by repairing ourselves and our relationships. We must integrate our beliefs and our actions, our faith and wisdom. We must make peace with our brothers and sisters, with our parents and our children.

¹¹ Indeed, we are obligated to honor our parents even after their passing (*Kidushin* 31b. Zohar end of *Bechukosei* (III 115b). *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'eh* 240:9. In Zohar he explains how a child, by behaving appropriately and repairing his ways, brings honor to his parent also in heaven, and it arouses God's compassion to "place him in his divine royal throne." It also causes him to have holy children.

Yes, we Jews are indeed dreamers, but also realists: We hope and long for utopia, but we also know that the key is on our hands.

So where, my friends, does heaven meet earth? Right at your – and my – doorstep...

When we achieve harmony at home – *shalom bayit* – and end any divisiveness between each other, we will be empowered to go out and bring harmony to the world at large. And then, at long last, Isaiah's prophecy will come true. Amen