



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vaeira

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Vaeira

**HyperCacher in Paris:
Not a Eulogy!**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Peace is an essential Jewish value. The word appears in the Tanach 240 times, thousands of times in the Talmud and works of Jewish philosophy, and it is the word with which we greet one another – Shalom.

But how can we ever find peace when our family is being slaughtered?

Friday, one week ago, four holy Jews – Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab, Phillipe Barham and François-Michel Saada – went to the local HyperCacher kosher market in Paris to buy food for Shabbat. As the sun was about to set on the mundane week and the holy Shabbat was about to begin, these four Jews were murdered by evil personified. These four precious souls gave up their lives in the sanctification of God’s Name!

As they were laid to rest on Jerusalem’s Har Menuchot on Tuesday, the words of the mourners’ *Kaddish* echoed throughout the world:

Oseh Shalom ... He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace for us and for all Israel; and let us say, Amen.

How do we bring that peace from His heights into our earthly chaos below?

As Moses rose up against Pharaoh and the Egyptians, so too, must we rise up against the modern-day mutations of this evil. To shrug, be silent or helpless is not an option. Peace (or freedom) will not be achieved with eulogies – this is a time for action.

Ten plagues were visited upon Egypt; ten steps which are our template for turning constricting exile into liberating freedom. Within the seventh plague of hail lies our answer to avenging the blood of our holy brothers, to finding peace at last.

HYPER-CACHER IN PARIS: NOT A EULOGY!

1. No Time to Mourn

We are never allowed to depress Jews. And we are certainly not allowed to mourn and eulogize on Shabbat. We have to perpetually serve God with joy and happiness, and making Jews sad is certainly not the role of a rabbi.

But, it is also not the role of a rabbi to ignore a reality in this world that is becoming more and more blatant. I do not speak here to eulogize or mourn – I speak here to combat the evil that is trying to annihilate our nation, a holy nation (*goy kadosh*) that is a God’s treasure (*am segulah*) and a kingdom of priests (*mamlechet kohaim*)!¹

As Moses rose up against Pharaoh and the Egyptians, so too, must we rise up against the modern-day mutations of this evil. To shrug, be silent or helpless is not an option. This is a time for action.

Friday, one week ago, four holy Jews went to the local market to buy food for Shabbat. As the sun was about to set on the mundane week and the holy Shabbat was about to begin, these four holy Jews were slaughtered by evil personified. These four precious souls – Yohan Cohen, 22, Yoav Hattab, 21, Phillipe Barham, 45 and François-Michel Saada, 64 – gave up their lives in the sanctification of God’s Name.

HyperCacher, meaning “Super Kosher,” was the name of the kosher market -- at the Porte de Vincennes branch in the eastern suburbs of Paris – where our four brothers were murdered by Islamist terrorist Amedy Coulibaly. Four super kosher, super refined Jews, serving their benevolent Creator, were cut down by a venomous force hell-bent on destroying the Jewish people.

It ain’t gonna happen. Just ask Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

¹ Exodus 19:6.

2. Israel's Enemies

Some 3,500 years ago Israel's enemies tried to snuff out our holy nation. And, since then, the evils of Egypt have been reincarnated throughout our history – by the Amalekites, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Nazis, and, today, the Muslim Jihadists.

Sure, we know that not all Muslims desire to slaughter Jews, just as not all Germans, Russians, Christians, Romans, Persians, Babylonians, or Egyptians desired to kill Jews. But, nevertheless, here we are in the progressive, liberal year of 2015, and a Muslim Jihadist walks into a Jewish kosher market on Erev Shabbat and slaughters four Jews.

Here we are, after a Jewish French woman was raped, children at a Jewish French school were gunned down, and French synagogues were attacked.

Here we are, in 2015, and Israel – the land and the people – has to spend its divine energy fighting for its life.

How to respond?

God gives us the answer in the Torah.

In response to Egyptian persecution, God afflicted Egypt with ten plagues. These ten plagues were meant to be ten steps in turning constricting exile into liberating freedom. These ten plagues are our template of how to overcome the life-choking evils of the world and embrace the infinite life of our core divine spark, our *Pintele Yid*.

The seventh plague, *barad* or “hail,” in particular, encapsulates how to turn war into peace, how to turn darkness into light, how to obliterate murdering entities and create a world of only life-giving and life-affirming forces.

3. Kaddish: Oseh Shalom

As the four sacred souls of Paris were laid to rest on Tuesday on Jerusalem's Har Menuchot (Mount of Rest), in the warm embrace of the holiest city, the heartbreaking sound of the mourners' *Kaddish* could be heard:

Yitgadal, v'Yitkadash Shmei Rabba – Exalted and sanctified is Your Great Name...

Then the mourners took three steps back, and that final line reverberated from the hills of Jerusalem, down to Paris and throughout the entire world, as all of God's creation come to a deafening and reverent silence:

Oseh Shalom Bimromov, Hu Yaseh Shalom Aleinu, v'Al Kol Yisrael v'Imru, Amen – He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace for us and for all Israel; and let us say, Amen.

This prayer is based on a verse from the Book of Job:

Dominion and fear are with Him; He who makes peace in His heights.²

What does it mean to make peace in His heights? What are “dominion” and “fear?”

The Midrash explains that “dominion” refers to the angel Michael, and “fear” refers to the angel Gabriel. Michael, the Midrash tells us, is represented by snow or water, and Gabriel is represented by fire. *He who makes peace in His heights* refers to God uniting and making peace between these two opposites of water and fire. Indeed, says the Midrash, though the firmaments are made of water and the stars of fire, the two of them never extinguish each other and they coexist peacefully.³

Such is the miraculous wonder of God, providing cohesion to polar opposites, making peace in His heights.

And that brings us to the seventh plague *barad* or “hail,” when ice and fire rained down on the earth.

² Job 25:2.

³ Shir Hashirim Rabba 3:20.

4. Hail Of A Miracle

It was a hail of a miracle.

Normally, hail is frozen pellets of rain pelting down upon earth. But the plague of hail was a little different:

And there was hail, and fire flaming within the hail, very heavy, the likes of which had never been throughout the entire land of Egypt since it had become a nation.⁴

Was the hail frozen rain or raining fire?

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, cites the Tanchuma⁵ that this plague was a miracle within a miracle. The fire and hail intermingled. Although hail is icy water and fire is extreme heat, to perform the will of their Maker they made peace between themselves – the hail did not extinguish the fire and the fire did not melt the hail.

We all know that supernatural occurrences do not happen without purpose. Thus, if water and fire are in the same place at the same time – which is counter to their natural characteristics – there is a purpose for it and lesson for us in our lives – a lesson that can help us transcend the evil of this present day exile as well.

5. We are Indestructible

And that lesson is: We are indestructible.

(Which reminds me of the Chassidic Russian chant that goes: “*Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v’agniom nye s’gorim,*” – “In water we will not drown, and in fire we will not burn.”)

The plague of hail teaches us something profound about the Jewish condition, about what it means to have a soul that is *chelek Eloka mimaal mamash*,⁶ a literal spark of the Divine embedded within us.

⁴ Exodus 9:24

⁵ Vaeira 14.

⁶ Tanya chapter 2.

Fire can be extinguished by water; water can be boiled by fire. Flames may be quenched by ice; ice may be melted by heat. Water and fire, fire and water, two mortal enemies.

But, tell me, can the Divine Creator of fire and water be burned by fire or drowned by water? Can a soul, a spark of the Divine Creator, ever be melted by fire or frozen by ice?

That Jihadist may have opened fire upon our holy brothers but what that beast could not fathom is that a soul cannot be fired upon. A soul is bulletproof. A soul is much higher and hotter than any fire. A soul is indestructible because it is part of God Himself.

And this message was conveyed to the Egyptians in the seventh plague of hail, and to anyone else who cares to read the story.

Pharaoh, Hitler, Amalek, Haman, Hamas, Enemy X – do you think it's possible to destroy the Jewish people? Israel is on a level where fire and water can coexist. Israel's role in this world is to bridge the fire and water elements ... to bring warmth and heat where there is only ice and indifference ... to bring cool salve and calming influence where there is only raging fire.

6. Speaking Practically

This is all well and good philosophically, intellectually. But how about practically?

How can we practically turn the chaos of exile – the darkness that tries to snuff out our lights – into the cohesion of peace and freedom? What can we do to combat this negativity?

First, we must recognize that we are sourced in a Creator that transcends both fire and ice. We must remember that no matter what happens – no matter what death or darkness – we come from a higher place.⁷

⁷ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 25, p. 260-262 and footnotes there.

7. Midrashic Parable

Since it may be difficult to remember this, the Midrash provides a parable to help us internalize this idea:

Two warring legions constantly fought each other; they were always at each other's throats. But then one day the king of the entire realm went to war and enlisted these two legions to fight under his banner. Immediately, the warring legions ceased fighting one another and united to fight together against the common enemy.⁸

Fire and water are opposites and have conflicting agendas. Fire is hot; ice is cold. Fires burn up; waters rush down. Fire is passionate, visceral and personal; water is cool, calm, collected and cerebral.

We all have these two elements within us, the passionate, personal, visceral fires of life and the cool, cerebral, abstract waters of life – our intellectual axioms and our emotional reactions, our objective truths and our subjective choices.

How can these two ever coexist? How can we ever achieve unity and cohesion between these two – our water and fire, our “dominion” and “fear,” our angel Michael and our angel Gabriel?

Says the Torah:

He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace for us and for all Israel; and let us say, Amen.

The plague of hail was a wonder: two opposites united under the King's banner.

Whenever we have conflict in life, one side fire, one side water, we can either vanquish one side or the other, or we can unite them under one greater banner, under the banner of God.

⁸ Shemot Rabba 12:6.

8. The Lesson of Freedom

And this brings us to the second lesson of this miracle: how to achieve freedom.

Egypt, exile, slavery, confinement, limitation – these evils create a reality where two contrasting elements cannot flourish together.

To shatter such a myopic reality, to shatter Egypt, we need the seventh plague of hail. The Creator of the Universe rained down upon an enslaving empire this plague, an embodiment of two opposites – ice and heat, united under one divine banner.

This is how we overcome conflict. But enemies of Israel cannot reach this level of miraculous hail – where the fires of life and the waters are one and the same, sourced in the same Supreme Creator – thus they try to snuff out anything other than their own selfish selves. Those who do not get the profundity of life believe that either one or the other element can exist, but they can't exist together. This engenders a battle between the two for supremacy.

But freedom is realizing that there is One Supremacy in this world, G-O-D, and every other element – fire, water, ice, heat – is part of that peaceful supremacy.

9. Combating Terror

Sometimes, the best way to combat terror – 3,500 years ago or today – is by removing conflict from our own personal lives. An example how to do so:

Say there is a conflict between your job and your family. You are constantly asking yourself: Should I dedicate more time to my family and compromise my career projections, or should I work overtime and compromise my family life? Something's gotta give between fire and water...

Enter God and His Torah, which teaches us that work is not achieving supremacy but a means to changing the world – family life is not meant to compromise your changing of the world but facilitate it. So now the question becomes: What unified combination of family and work is best to change the world into a Divine Home and to be victorious over the common enemy of apathy, limitation and exile?

By bringing God into everything, we become victorious.

10. Unity Among Jews

Another way of combating terror is unity of our people.

There are two types of Jews, there are Jews of fire and there are Jews of water. Fiery Jews are passionate, pulsating, bubbling with action and emotion. Watery Jews are stoic, cerebral, cool, calm and collected.

Often these two types don't get along.

But we need to realize that each of us is, at times, the fiery Jew and, at other times, the icy Jew. Sometimes we are passionate about things; sometimes we are passive about things. Instead of criticizing each other, we must see ourselves in our brothers and sisters, and find a way to come together as one.

At times like these, when our core family is being attacked, we Jews must tap into our higher source, the place that transcends fire and water. Such a place indeed allows fire and water not only to coexist but to bind together to strike the enemy and obliterate its murderous intentions.

And this, through our fire and water unity, is what we must do.

11. Rise In Peace (Conclusion)

The world says RIP, “Rest In Peace.” Do you think a soul that has been detached from its body by some murdering sickness can ever rest? How can a soul rest in peace when there is no peace in God’s earth?

Jews don’t say “rest in peace” – Jews say “rise up in peace.” *Oseh shalom bimromov...*

We will not rest when our family is being attacked. We will not rest until the peace of the heights – where fire and ice, Michael and Gabriel, firmaments and stars, are all one – is also the peace down below on earth.

This is the Redemption we pray for formally three times a day, but breathe with every inhale and exhale of our lives.

He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace for us and for all Israel ... And let us say, Amen.

Shabbat Shalom!