



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayishlach

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November 28, 2015  
Vayishlach

**Bar Mitzvah and Terrorism**



# Meaningful Sermons

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Enter the Heart"*

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## ABSTRACT

More Jews stabbed and slaughtered. What is going on?

Young men and women stabbed to death on the highways, byways and holy streets of Israel. What can we do?

Perhaps the timeless cliché, "the pen is mightier than the sword," is true, but that's only if you live someplace where it's safe to pick up the pen. If not, you must first pick up the sword.

As usual, this week's Torah reading has something to say about that very subject. The story of the violation of Dinah, and the contrast between Jacob's response and that of Simon and Levi, teaches us everything we need to know to respond to and uproot the terror and evil of today.

Believe it or not, it all has to do with Bar Mitzvah.

Genesis

Vayishlach

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## BAR MITZVAH AND TERRORISM

### 1. Current Events

This past week, a young woman was stabbed and killed in Gush Etzion; a young man was stabbed and killed on Route 443, this after an American boy, Ezra Schwartz, from Sharon, Massachusetts, was murdered in cold blood.

We pray, we cry, we question and soul-search. We mourn with the mourners of Zion, seeking consolation of the inconsolable.

The attacks keep piling up. As do the sacred bodies of holy Jews. What to do? How to do it? And when?

What can our Torah teach us about terror, and how to respond to this evil? Better yet, not just respond but actually preempt and prevent.

### 2. Parshat Vayishlach

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vayishlach* – contains a most dramatic and heart-wrenching narrative. This narrative mirrors the goings-on today in Israel and the world, and has many lessons relevant to our day and situation.

*Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit some of the young women in the locality. And Shechem the son of Hamor, the Hivvite, the prince of the land, saw her, and he took her, lay with her and violated her.*<sup>1</sup>

What was Dinah's father's response to this heinous attack?

*Jacob had heard that his daughter Dinah had been defiled. His sons were with the livestock in the field, and Jacob kept silent until they came home.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 34:1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 34:5.

What was Dinah's brothers' response to this dreadful attack?

*And Jacob's sons came home from the field. When they heard [what had happened], the men were shocked and they seethed with anger, for he [Shechem] had committed an outrage against Israel, lying with a daughter of Jacob. Such an act could not be tolerated.<sup>3</sup>*

So what happened next?

Well, Shechem had apparently fallen in love with Dinah, so he and his father, Hamor, decided to make peace with Jacob and his family. They proposed that the rapist marry his victim, and that the two peoples, the Israelites and the Hivvite become one, peaceful united nation.

This is how the Torah describes their proposal:

*Hamor said [to the brothers and Jacob], "My son Shechem desires your daughter. Please give her to him for a wife. And intermarry with us; you shall give us your daughters, and you shall take our daughters for yourselves. And you shall dwell with us, and the land shall be open before you. Remain here, do business here and settle here."*

*And Shechem said to [Dinah's] father and to her brothers, "I will do anything to regain your favor. I will give you whatever you ask. Impose upon me a large marriage settlement and [demand] gifts, and I will give you whatever you ask, but let me have the girl for a wife."*

*Thereupon, Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with cunning. After all, they were speaking to the one who had defiled their sister Dinah. And they said, "We cannot do this thing. To give our sister to an uncircumcised man is a disgrace to us. The only way we could possibly agree if you would be like us and circumcise every male. Only then could we give you our daughters, and take your daughters for ourselves, and dwell with you and become one people. But if you do not accept our terms to be circumcised, we will take our [sister] and go."*

*Their words pleased Hamor and Shechem, the son of Hamor. And the young man did not delay to do [what they had asked] because he desired Jacob's daughter ...*

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 34:7.

*Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city, and they spoke to the people of their city: "These men are friendly to us, and they will dwell in the land and do business here, for the land is spacious enough for them. We will take their daughters for ourselves as wives, and we will give them our daughters. However, on this [condition] will the men consent to dwell with us, to become one people – that every male among us be circumcised, just as they are circumcised. Then shall not their cattle, their property, and all their beasts be ours? So let us consent to them, and they will dwell with us."*

*And all those who came to the gate of his city listened to Hamor and his son Shechem, and every male ... became circumcised.<sup>4</sup>*

Now, let me ask you: How could Jacob and his sons agree to marry off Dinah to a rapist, the man who violated her? How could Shechem, Hamor and their ilk ever become peaceful partners?

For such a thing to occur would be akin to a terror victim deciding to marry the terrorist? How in God's name could Jacob's sons propose anything like this?

But wait, here's the end of the story:

*Now it came to pass on the third day, when they [the newly circumcised men] were in pain that Jacob's two sons, Simon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took up his sword. They came to the city without arousing suspicion and killed every male. They also killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and they took Dinah from Shechem's house and left.<sup>5</sup>*

And what was Jacob's reaction to this "disproportionate" response of his sons?

*Thereupon, Jacob said to Simon and to Levi, "You have brought trouble upon me, discrediting me among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and among the Perizzites. I have only a small number of men,*

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 34:8-24.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 34:25-26.

*and they will band together and attack me, and I and my family will be wiped out.” But they said, “Should he be allowed to treat our sister like a whore?”<sup>6</sup>*

### 3. Perplexing Questions

The violation of Dinah, and Simon and Levi’s response (*The New York Times* would call it a “hawkish response”) is rife with perplexing questions:

1. Why was Jacob silent when he heard about the attack on his daughter?
2. Why did Jacob reprimand Simon and Levi, saying *You have brought trouble upon me, discrediting me among the inhabitants of the land...?*
3. Earlier in the same portion Jacob was re-named Israel, due to the fact that he “battled and prevailed.”<sup>7</sup> If anyone should know how to uproot terrorists threatening and attacking Israel it should be Israel himself. Why then did Jacob/Israel criticize Simon and Levi?<sup>8</sup>
4. On the other hand, how could Simon and Levi take up the sword to slaughter people? (Levi – need we be reminded – is the progenitor of the priestly class of Kohanim, and the Levites who officiated in the Temple.)
5. And even if we say that killing of the rapist Shechem was justified, what justification was there for killing the entire city?

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 32:29.

<sup>8</sup> This question becomes even more amplified when we see how Jacob reprimands Simon and Levi towards the end of the Book of Genesis (49:5-6, Rashi ad loc). There Jacob suggests that Simon and Levi inherited this idea of killing, the craft of murder, from Esau.

The commentaries discuss the rape of Dinah *ad infinitum*, addressing questions we have posed (and many more) in a variety of innovative and creative ways.<sup>9</sup> One fascinating subject that comes up is Bar Mitzvah,<sup>10</sup> since Simon and Levi were 13 years old at the time these events occurred.

#### 4. Bar Mitzvah at Age 13

At age 13 a boy becomes a man and has a Bar Mitzvah; henceforth he is obligated in all the mitzvot of the Torah. From where do we know that this is supposed to happen at age 13? There are two opinions:

1. It is *halacha l'Moshe m'Sinai*, one of the laws given to Moses at Mount Sinai, and which he then conveyed orally to the people of Israel.<sup>11</sup>
2. It is revealed in the very Torah verse we just read: *Now it came to pass on the third day, when they [the newly circumcised men] were in pain, that Jacob's two sons, Simon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took up his sword (ish charbo) ... Simon and Levi were 13 at the time,*<sup>12</sup> and the verse calls each of them *ish*, meaning "man," thus we see that at 13 years of age one becomes a man.<sup>13</sup>

According to the first opinion, we know that Bar Mitzvah is at age 13 because Moses was so instructed at Mount Sinai. But according to the second opinion, we glean this knowledge from the verse in our Torah portion, specifically the verse that describes 13-year-old Simon and Levi as "men" when they picked up their swords to kill those threatening their family.

<sup>9</sup> See Likkutei Sichot V, pp. 150, XV pp. 289 for some of the commentaries.

<sup>10</sup> The following is based on and inspired by Likkutei Sichot *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Responsa of the Rosh, beginning Klal #16. Responsa of the Maharil, #51; Rashi to Avot *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis Rabbah 80:10. Midrash Lekach Tov and Siman Tov *ad loc*.

<sup>13</sup> Rashi to Nazir p. 29b, v'rab yossi; Rashi and Bartenura to Avot 5:21. Cf Tosafot to Sanhedrin 69a, *biyadua*.

This, of course, begs the obvious and glaring question: Could the Torah not find a better verse to teach that Bar Mitzvah is at age 13? Why should Bar Mitzvah be associated with killing?

Bar Mitzvah is a beautiful time, when our sons enter into the sublime world of Torah and mitzvot. Do we really want to associate this time – at a highly impressionable age – with swords, bloodshed and revenge, even if that killing is justified, and even if it is necessary in order to remove a proven threat?

Especially since Jacob did not approve, admonishing Simon and Levi here and later on his deathbed as well.

What then is the connection between becoming a man (*ish*) at 13, the Bar Mitzvah age, and the aggressive, violent response of Simon and Levi?

## 5. Two Responses to Terror: Emotional and Cerebral

This entire story and its intrinsic connection with Bar Mitzvah begins to make sense when we look at the episode as if it were happening today – and it is!

A terrorist, a murderer, a butcher attacks and violates a pure soul, ripping life and innocence from it. This has happened, sadly, in Jerusalem, in Paris, in New York and other places on the globe.

Any normal, sane individual may react to such an attack in two ways: 1) emotionally, and/or 2) cerebrally.

One response – the emotional response – is anger, passionate and vengeful, the burning fire that propels us to destroy that evil monster immediately and instantly. Another response – the cerebral response – is silence, as in reflection; this response does not ignore the atrocities or turn a blind eye to them, but it is a response not of heat but of a deep quiet contemplativeness. It is the disciplined restraint of the Commander-in-Chief who must carefully and dispassionately plan how to destroy the enemy and uproot his ilk once and for all.



These two reactions were the two different reactions of Jacob and his sons to the rape of Dinah and the outrageous demands of Shechem.

Jacob approached it with silence. He was Dinah's father and, of course, he couldn't ignore such an attack against his vulnerable and innocent daughter. But Jacob/Israel was the head of the family, the Commander-in-Chief. Thus he approached this incident with deliberate restraint.

Jacob had a plan to influence all of the lands and to illuminate God's name in all of the Middle East. This is why when Simon and Levi reacted as they did, Jacob told them, *You have brought trouble upon me, discrediting me among the inhabitants of the land ...* This was a Commander-in-Chief telling his sons that he had a plan not to act hastily, which their rash actions had upended.

Simon and Levi, however, were but 13 years of age; they did not have the temperament, nor developed cerebral prowess of their father; they simply reacted to the attack against their beloved sister from their guts, emotionally, instinctively and passionately – they raged against evil.

And even the left-leaning columnists at *The New York Times* would agree that such a response is sometimes a necessary reaction, and that its lack is troubling, even dangerous. See for example Roger Cohen's column of last week, where he writes: "Freedom has to be fought for. It can demand anger. These killers make us hostages of our own democracies. They trample on the very border-crossing freedoms that European passports afford them. The West, post-Iraq, has lost its capacity for rage, even at this. That is dangerous."<sup>14</sup>

Simon and Levi thus told Jacob: "*Should he be allowed to treat our sister like a whore?*" They were not going to make any long term plans – they had to hit the enemy and hit him hard. This is why they picked up their swords, like men, and killed Shechem, Hamor, and their entire city – a city that bred evil and harbored perpetrators of heinous crimes.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/opinion/body-bags-in-paris.html>.

## 6. Lessons for Today

This is why we learn that Bar Mitzvah should take place at age 13 specifically from here, from this episode of Simon and Levi picking up their swords.

The age of Bar Mitzvah, when one is obligated to fulfill every (appropriate) mitzvah, is the age when the passionate emotions of youth begin to be informed by and tempered with the cerebral mind of the adult.

But herein is the catch: if the adult becomes too cerebral, always planning long term and never seizing the moment, then the adult loses the necessary passion and fire to engender change.

On the other hand, if passion, fire and anger are all there is, then the train can go off the rails rather quickly, and the flame can burn out and fade.

Thus Bar Mitzvah takes place at age 13, when one is burning with the fire and passion of youth, yet is also on the path of cerebral mindfulness and seasoned, mature long-term thinking.

This balance in general – and definitely in the emergency situation of terror attacks – is what the episode of Dinah teaches us. For Jacob wasn't merely standing by – Jacob, the father of Israel, was teaching a fundamental lesson:

When faced with adversity, enemies, challenges, terrorists, murderers, defilers, violators, rapists and killers, you must be an *ish*, a “man” and think of the big picture, so you can ensure that the wildfire of evil is not just snuffed out temporarily, but also that it is uprooted at the source and its embers don't re-ignite again. Yes, there is a place for the passions of youth to instinctively and quickly react to and instantly stamp out the hatred and darkness, but take care, plan ahead and do the job right.

This balance of short-term immediate response and the long-term game plan is the approach we all must take in fighting evil and keeping the light aloft.

This is the power of Bar Mitzvah: the power of emotion balanced with mature vision.

## 7. The Haftorah (Conclusion)

The Haftorah of our portion is a messianic vision of the Final Redemption. And it states:

*And on Mount Zion there shall be a remnant, which shall be holy, and the House of Jacob shall inherit those who inherited them. And the House of Jacob shall be fire and the House of Joseph a flame...*<sup>15</sup>

Herein as well are hinted the two necessary and simultaneous responses to terror, evil and any negativity in general:

- 1) We must have the long term, cerebral vision that is the inheritance of the House of Jacob, so that ultimately we will – in accordance with our universal objective and global plan – transform the earth into a place of goodness and kindness, Godliness and light.
- 2) But with that must come passion and fire – the fire of the House of Jacob and the flame of the House of Joseph – so that we ensure that the vision burns bright and that no enemy or deterrent stands in the way of its blaze.

May Hashem protect the children of Israel – and people everywhere.

May we never again have to raise the sword, but only raise the world up to its fullest potential – a world of total and permanent peace.

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>15</sup> Obadiah 1:17-18.