



VAYIKRA

Behar-Bechukosai
Israel's Secret Weapon
May 12, 2018

ISRAEL'S SECRET WEAPON

ABSTRACT

The subject of this sermon is Israel's secret weapon as revealed in this week's Torah reading.

As tensions escalate in Syria, and Iran escalates its threats to Israel, it is fitting to mobilize – in addition to its physical military power – Israel's deepest strengths.

What protects Israel? What is the secret weapon that it always holds in its back pocket? What is the power that will allow it to vanquish any and all adversaries?

Long ago, Jews have mastered the art of self-defense. We know very well what we stand against. But what do we stand *for*?

1. Dog Eat Dog (Joke)

After 70 years of not being able to settle the disputes between them, the Israelis and the Palestinians hit on a novel idea of resolving the conflict – a fight between designated champions in the style of David and Goliath. Winner take all.

With one slight variation. Instead of using people as the champions, they would use dogs. Yes, it is easier to come up with ideas like that in the Middle East where animal rights are hardly heard of.

Over the next five years, each side bred its champion dog. And on the day of the big event, they both appeared.

The Palestinian dog handlers (who were already missing a few fingers) were hardly able to restrain – with steel chains, mind you – the monster dog they had bred for the occasion – a Rottweiler-Mastiff-Doberman-Pit Bull-Wolf cross ... on steroids!

Meanwhile, the Israelis arrived with a very strange animal – a Dachshund that was ten feet long with a ridiculously long snout.

The audience laughed. No one present thought this odd-looking animal stood any chance against the growling beast over in the Arab camp. The bookies all took one look and predicted the monster dog would win over the Dachshund in less than a minute.

The cages were opened. The Dachshund slowly waddled toward the center of the ring. The Arab dog charged. As he got close enough for contact, the Dachshund opened its jaws and swallowed the Arab beast whole in

one bite. There was nothing left but a small puff of fur floating to the ground.

The stunned crowd of international observers, bookies and media reporters let out a collective gasp of surprise.

After the hubbub had died down, the Arabs approached the Israelis, muttering and shaking their heads in disbelief. “We do not understand,” they said, “our top breeders worked for five years with the biggest and meanest dogs. They developed an incredible killing machine. What happened?”

The Israeli general replied: “Well, for five years we’ve had a team of Jewish plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills working to make an alligator look like a Dachshund.”

That introduces today’s topic – Israel’s Secret Weapon ... and it is not a dog, a human being, the nuclear reactor in Dimona, the Iron Dome, or any other man-made weapon.

What is it?

Stay with me for a bit ...

2. Israel’s Challenges

As tensions escalate in Syria, and Iran escalates its threats to Israel, it is fitting to mobilize – in addition to its physical military power – Israel’s deepest strengths.

For sure today, Israel’s military force and prowess and formidable. But the strength of Israel – and of the Jewish people – was always more than just physical. It was their spiritual fortitude that gave them the edge to face all their adversaries.

Israel and Jews must always ask itself the question: Why do we exist? What is our deeper purpose? What role do we play and what contribution do we make to the welfare of the entire world that looks to us as the Holy and Promised Land?

In truth, Israel is not 70 years old. It is more like 3755 years old – if you count from the time that Abraham first settled in the land. Or, 3290 years old – if you count from the time the Israelites entered the Promised Land.

This number is not just a matter of semantics; it had far-reaching consequences. For example, if Israel is *only* 70 years old, what right does it have to displace the Palestinians some of whom have been living there longer than the Jews?

Although Israel’s age is not our focus today, it’s hard to ignore the relevance of this week’s Torah reading, which defines in succinct and pointed terms the purpose of the Land of Israel.

3. A Range of Opinions

Contrast always helps crystallize matters. Examining the wide range of opinions about Israel's mission will help us appreciate, by contrast, the Torah startling message to us on this matter.

From the time of modern Zionism's birth in the 19th century, the meaning of the return to Israel and creation of a Jewish homeland was fraught with different interpretations and objectives:

- Some argued that the objective of the state was a political one.
- Then there were who focused on the culture, language and economics of the state.
- Others maintained that the return to the Jewish homeland was of religious nature.
- Still others adamantly opposed the creation of a secular state, which they saw as defiance of G-d.

Even Albert Einstein, not a religious man, was worried about what this new state would mean. As he put it, "My awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish State, with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power, no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain."

From one extreme to the next, the meaning and purpose of Israel was a matter of hot debate. And, as a result, Zionism took on different shapes: socialist, revisionist, political, agrarian, synthetic, utopian, nationalist, cultural, religious.

Not surprisingly, anti-Zionism also came in various colors.

4. No Consensus

To this day no consensus has ever been reached as to the true purpose of the Land of Israel. This is part of the reason why Israel has never able to adopt a formal constitution (and instead lives by the so-called "Eleven Basic Laws"). The conflict over what constitutes the foundation of Israeli society simply runs too deep.

Many religious Jews hold that the only real constitution for a Jewish state is the Torah and Jewish law. They not only see no need for a modern secular constitution, but even consider such a document a threat to the supremacy of the Torah and the tradition associated with it. In contrast, the secular majority wants the state to be strictly secular (as in the slogan "a state of civil law, not a state of Torah law"). With all the attempts to achieve reconciliation, the issue remains deadlocked. And the resulting polarization has not allowed a formal constitution to be ratified.

In such a muddled quagmire how can we ever effectively reflect on the meaning of Israel's birth, and what would constitute its success? The answer, of course, depends on what we call success, which brings us back to the question: What is the identity and nature of Israel?

5. What is Israel's Identity?

For instance, if Israel is strictly about establishing a Jewish homeland, you can call it a huge success. In 1914, Israel's Jewish population was just 60,000. In 1948, it was 800,000. Today it is over 6.5 million – the largest concentrated population of Jews on earth, surpassing even the United States.

And, if Israel is about defense and a strong army, or about developing technologies and standard of living, it clearly is also a success.

As a center for Torah scholarship and thriving religion – Israel is also a shining triumph.

But if Israel is about spiritual vision, unity among Jews, leadership, spirituality, a moral standard, being a light unto nations – then there is much to be desired.

6. What Does Israel Stand For?

A joke is told about an Israeli minister who gets up in the Knesset and declares: “I have found the solution to all our problems. Instead of continuing our struggle with the Arabs, let us attack ... America. They will surely beat us, and then they will rebuild us like they did Japan and Germany after WWII, and we will become a superpower.”

In response, an old Jew sitting in the back of the hall pipes up: “Ve vill atteck Amerikeh ... very nice and gutt. But vot happens if vi vin?!”

Long ago, we Jews have mastered the art of self-defense. We are survivors and have learned to overcome any type of enemy. There is no better underdog than the Jew. But now that we are in power and have a country and our freedom, the question is what are we fighting for?

We are excellent at putting out fires and knowing what we stand against – we oppose anti-Semitism, racism, discrimination, oppression, etc. But what do we stand *for*?

Once when we had no homeland, we were fighting for a home that we can call our own. Now that we have that home, what should be our vision for the future?

7. This Week's Torah Reading

The answer comes in the first chapter of the of this week's double Torah reading – *Parshat Bebar* – which states, quoting G-d:

When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land must be given a rest period, a Shabbat to G-d. For six years you may plant your fields, prune your vineyards, and harvest your crops, but the seventh year is a *Shabbat Shabbaton* for the land.¹

Did you notice something strange here? The Torah is saying that, as soon as you enter the land, you must let it rest. And then it specifies the conditions of the rest, which are that you work first for six years and the seventh year you let it rest. So how is it that you are to let it rest *as soon as* you enter?

8. G-d's Land

The significance of the sabbatical year is to remind us that earth belongs to G-d, not to man. And that this awareness must take precedence. This very fact alerts us that the purpose of our lives and our hard work (six years of planting, pruning and harvesting) is to transform and spiritualize the material universe, elevating it to a state of Shabbat holiness.

By opening with the commandment of the sabbatical year, the Torah is brilliantly emphasizing the mission and purpose of coming “to the land that I am giving you.” In other words, “When you come to the land that I am giving you, never forget its purpose and *raison d'être* – and that is bringing holiness down to earth ... in short, a Shabbat to G-d.”

9. Forgotten Purpose

What happens when an entity sadly forgets its purpose or wanders off course? It cannot function properly, as it becomes displaced from its driving ethos. Think of a machine that is not following its engineer's objectives.

When the purpose of the land is tragically forgotten, displacement follows, as the sages warn us: “Exile comes to the world for ... not resting the earth.”² Conversely, when the sabbatical purpose is remembered, redemption comes to the world. Indeed, the Talmud says that the Messiah will come at the end of the sabbatical year.

¹ Leviticus 25:2-4.

² Avot 5:9.

10. The Soul of the Holy Land

Why is respecting the holiness of the earth so important?

Everything in this world has a soul. Health is dependent on the body and its mechanics being aligned to their soul. How much more so when it comes to the Holy Land, the Promised Land?

Surely, its optimal welfare and success is contingent on it living up to its soul.

Jerusalem – sometimes called Zion – is synonymous with spirit, with the Divine. It is the soul of Jewish life and all life. And Zion actually means “sign.” It is a sign and symbol of the Divine Presence. Indeed, the same word Zion refers at times to the city, to the Jewish people and to the Torah, signifying the inseparable bond between the three – the land, the people and their Divine mandate.

The enduring mission of Zion is – as its name states – to be a shining example of spiritual light. Without Zion's spiritual dimension, all forms of Zionism – be they socialist, revisionist, political, agrarian, synthetic, utopian, nationalist, cultural, or religious – lack a soul. And without their soul they can only present short-term solutions, no better than any product whose shelf life is only as long as its utilitarian use.

11. Lessons of History

If we need convincing, then history, as usual, can be our best persuader. Study the rise and fall of empires. Why is it that mighty, wealthy, even cultured empires did not endure?

Empires have fallen because they outgrew their purpose, lost their direction, broke apart due to differences as to their purpose or perhaps because they never had a purpose in the first place.

As Mark Twain so eloquently observed:

If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race.³ It suggests a nebulous dim puff of smoke lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning, are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all ages: and has done it with his hands tied behind him ... All things are mortal but the Jew; all other

³ One quarter of one-percent as per today's post-Holocaust statistics.

forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

And here is the answer to Mark Twain:

The Jewish people survived it all and are still here because their mission never ended and they never outgrew it. The mission of the Jewish people from the beginning and until this very day was to civilize, refine and spiritualize the world in which we live ... in short, to be a “light unto nations,” a living example of the highest standards of values and ethics ... a living example of what it means to be divine ... to be living a life of a human created in the Divine Image ... to be always connected to our source in G-d.⁴

12. The Secret

This is also why, disproportionate to its size, the Land of Israel has carried unparalleled influence throughout history. From the beginning of time, people, nations and religions have been fighting for control of the Holy Land. What is the mysterious power of this small piece of geography – which is hardly bigger than New Jersey?

The answer is Israel's holiness.

Israel is the “gate to heaven,”⁵ where G-d meets man. It is the soul of the universe – its spiritual vortex. And the destiny of this place will always define the destiny of the entire globe.

This is the secret revealed in this week's Torah reading – the secret why Israel has dominated the news not only for 70 years, but for the last four millennia.

And now for the answer to the question: What is Israel's secret weapon?

It is the sabbatical year – which is shorthand for recognizing that this land belongs to G-d and treating it as such.

Israel's most powerful weapon is not arms or artillery or any other force. It is Israel's spiritual message to the world. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says G-d.”⁶ And the world awaits a Divine message emanating from the Holy Land. This should be Israel's number one export.

Living in the Promised Land is not somebody's whim or personal desire. It reflects a global vision for life: the Divine promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give them the Land of Israel – the Holy Land, a place that would be sanctified and transformed into a spiritual haven. A land that would be a “light unto nations” – “a house of

⁴ Twain, Mark, *The Complete Essay of Mark Twain*, New York: Doubleday, 1963, p. 249; see also “Concerning the Jews,” an essay by Mark Twain in *Harper's Magazine*, September 1897

⁵ Genesis 28:17.

⁶ Zecahriah 4:6.

prayer for all people” – illuminating the entire world, serving as an example to all nations, peoples, races and cultures, how to live a life according to the highest spiritual standards. The Holy Land is meant to inspire every man, woman and child on earth to fulfill his or her Divine calling, and civilize his corner of the universe into a home for G-d.

When we remember that this land belongs to G-d, that we the Jewish people have a mission to fulfill in the land ... when we declare this message to the world, the entire globe will heed the call, and then Israel will not have to fear any of its adversaries. As Isaiah promised us so long ago:

It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of G-d's house shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills. And all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And many nations shall go and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of G-d, to the house of the G-d of Jacob, so that He may teach us of His ways and that we may walk in His paths. For from Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of G-d from Jerusalem."⁷

May we internalize this deep message of the Torah and may our efforts in keeping G-d's commandments bring about the return to the land of all our people. And may the holiness of the land help us join together in perfect unity, so that our eyes behold the final redemption. And may it happen speedily in our days. Amen.

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⁷ Isaiah 2:2-3.