

Vayechi 5784

Saturday, December 30

12 weeks after October 7

Bnei Mitzvah of Hugo and Isaac Mandelbaum

Isaac and Hugo, thank you for your thoughtful divrei Torah. You both explored the moment when Jacob blessed his grandchildren.... Just before that moment, when Jacob realizes that Ephraim and Menashe are standing there, he says something poignant to Joseph: "I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well." Remember, Joseph was taken away as a captive by the Midianites and Jacob thought he might be dead. I say "might be", because though he was shown Joseph's bloody coat by his older children, the midrash imagines Jacob not giving up the possibility that his dear Joseph was still alive. Rashi translates the verse "I never expected to see you again" as: "I had never dared to cherish the thought that I would again see your face." Radak adds: "As far as Joseph's fate was concerned, Jacob said that he had not arrived at definitive conclusions but had not dared hope that he would ever see him again."

Day after day after day, Jacob lived in a terrible uncertainty about his beloved Joseph, not knowing if he was dead or alive, imagining every worst scenario, fantasizing about every best scenario, afraid to dare hope that he was alive and whole and healthy and well, and that one day they would be reunited.

It has been twelve weeks today since Hamas brutalized the kibbutzim of southwestern Israel, committing heinous acts, murdering 1,200, and taking 240 people hostage. More than 100 of the hostages remain. More than 100 families are experiencing what Jacob here describes.

These families, along with Israelis who have been freed from captivity and thousands of their supporters, have been protesting at the Kiryah, IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, demanding a return to negotiations. Noam Peri,

whose father Haim Peri remains in captivity, told the crowd recently, “We only receive dead bodies. We want you to stop the fight and start negotiations.”

Israel now has a choice. Between freeing the captives and continuing to fight this war.

Sima Kadmon wrote in Yedioth Ahronoth last Tuesday “Instead of the supreme ethical duty that we ought to feel towards the hostages, an attempt is now being made to cast them as a burden.”

“The prime minister doesn’t have even the least ability to deal with people who are heartbroken. He doesn’t possess the most basic human ability to look compassionately into the eyes of the people sitting in the Knesset gallery, people whose sons and daughters have been wallowing for 80 days in Hamas’s tunnels, and to say something that might inspire confidence.

“One thing that Netanyahu can’t do, by all signs, is get the hostages back. Not when that contradicts the war’s main objective, which was defined in the initial days as the only objective and only afterwards was it complemented with the objective of freeing the hostages. It is the same objective he has promised to achieve at every opportunity: to collapse, to crush, to oust, to demilitarize and to purge Gaza of Hamas. To go all the way.

“I believe”, Kadmon wrote, “that Netanyahu would like to see the hostages freed, but not at any price. Not at the price of halting the war. Halting the war will bring about all sorts of developments that Netanyahu doesn’t want to see happen: Gantz and Eisenkot will quit the government; he will come under fierce criticism from the extreme right and Ben Gvir might quit the government; the anti-government protests will be resumed, with massive reinforcements from the reservists who will return home; and a general election will be held within a matter of months.”

These priorities are backwards, and wrong. The paramount goal, from the perspective of Torah, must be the return of the hostages. Freeing the captives, pidiyon shvuyim, is one of the most important mitzvot or commandments of our tradition. This is true even when the cost includes

risk to future lives. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the longtime Sefardic chief rabbi of Israel, has argued that the immediate danger to the lives of the hostages overrules the possibility of future danger from release of prisoners. And beyond the clear mitzvah of pidyon shvuyim, the most important of all mitzvot in Torah is pikuach nefesh, to save a life.

While Israeli hostages continue to suffer unimaginably in Hamas's tunnels, aboveground 20,000 Gazans are dead and more Israeli soldiers and Palestinians are dying every day. A massive humanitarian crisis is underway. 1.9 million people are homeless, starving, without enough clean water to drink, and without adequate medical care. 54,000 Gazans are injured, the majority of whom are women and children. Israel has continued to drop massive bombs on the very places where Palestinians were told to flee to. Meanwhile, Yoav Zitun reported in *Yedioth Ahronoth* on Tuesday that "virtually every day, IDF soldiers discover Hamas militants inside UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) shelters, with their weapons, near children...The IDF sets up snipers...sometimes the terrorists shoot civilians who try to escape." It has to stop. Now.

It is time, now, for a negotiated end to this war. For a bilateral, negotiated end to the war.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was originally in the Likud party, wrote yesterday in Haaretz: "...the time has come for Israel to express its readiness to end the fighting. Yes, end the fighting. Not a pause and not a temporary cessation of two, three or four days. An end to the hostility, period. At that time, Israel will need to bring back the hostages, those who are alive and those who are dead. If we wait, it won't be long before the only ones we can bring back will be the dead, because there won't be any living ones.

"A cessation of hostilities must be conditioned on the release of all the hostages, every last one of them...."

It is time.

Every family who is waiting, desperate, terrified and longing, deserves to say what Jacob said to Joseph, in the midst of a deep embrace, with tears running down their faces, home: "I had never dared to cherish the thought that I would again see your face."

Shabbat Shalom.