

Vayeshev 5784

December 9, 2023 – 9 weeks since October 7

Chanukah Day 2

Jack and Ruby, what insightful divrei Torah you've given us this morning. Jack, you got inside the heads of the older brothers, in their jealousy of and annoyance with younger brother Joseph, and saw how they imagined that getting rid of him might solve their problem. But you made the case that getting rid of your enemy doesn't work and only comes back to hurt you in the end. You showed that both Israel and Hamas have eliminationist fantasies that come out in speech and action, and argued that in the end such an approach will only hurt them and the world. Ruby, you focused on older brother Judah, after he dipped Joseph's coat in blood and tricked his father into believing that his younger brother was dead, and you saw that what he did to his father was then done to him, both in the loss of his sons and in the trickery that led him to have children with Tamar. You even go so far as to seek the pattern of G-d's approval or disapproval, looking for the connections between the principles we live by and G-d's judgments of us. You point out that Judah changed over the course of the story, in the end recognizing that he was wrong and Tamar was right. In this parasha, we see Judah start to take responsibility for his actions, thereby moving from G-d's disapproval to G-d's approval. This will become even clearer in the rest of Genesis, but though we're named for Judah – Judah, Judea, Jew – the focus of the Torah is more on Joseph, the younger brother.

This is not unusual for Torah or for Judaism. We identify with the younger brother, with the little guy, with the powerless. Isaac was the younger brother, Jacob was the younger brother, Joseph is the younger brother. We are the Israelites who become oppressed slaves, who despite their powerlessness walk out of Pharaoh's grip to freedom. Later, we are little David against big Goliath. We are Esther and Mordecai and an unarmed minority facing the 50 million people of the Persian Empire who are holding an extermination order by the King. And this week, we are the Maccabees, a tiny band of indigenous rebels hiding in the Judean mountains with

slingshots and stones, swords and shields against the imperial Greek army, led by the Syrian Greeks, our colonizers. The stories we know best, the stories we focus on most, the stories we identify with in our holidays and in our history, star the Jewish people as small and powerless, but still somehow, with G-d's help, surviving, still somehow, with G-d's help, prevailing.

This Chanukah, in the wake of the atrocities committed against our people on October 7th, many Jews feel this story in a new way. We feel our vulnerability, our smallness, the powerlessness that led to our slaughter and captivity. Many among our people and many among our allies see us right now as the Maccabees. Once again hateful forces have risen up to destroy us and we are fighting back. We are, after all, only .2% of the world's population. Tiny, for sure. If we imagined different groups of humans like species in an ecosystem – to be clear, human beings are not different species from each other, there's only one human race that we all belong to – but if we used the metaphor of species in an ecosystem, Jews would be on the endangered species list. In fact, our population still hasn't reached the level it was before the Holocaust. 16.6 million Jews were alive in 1939, 15 million now. And the global hatred against our people persists despite how small we are, even in countries where there are no Jews. We saw this hatred in worldwide responses to October 7, which included celebrating our deaths, indifference to our deaths, and brushing over the horrific details of the atrocities committed against us, including astonishing silence about the horrific sexual violence committed against Israeli women.

All of this is true. Yet, in the context of Israel/Palestine, the Jewish people are not the Maccabees. Israel has the more powerful army, Israel has the more powerful economy, Israel has control of almost all of the land, and the natural resources. It's true that Israel is surrounded on all sides by countries that expelled Jews and collectively declared war on Israel in the past. True that Hamas is backed by Iran and its network of terrorist proxies. But that power is countered by the United States at Israel's back. Let's face it: Israel is dramatically more powerful than the Palestinians. American Jews who've grown up since the 1990's know this. The Maccabee story we

have about ourselves is not true in the context of Israel/Palestine right now, and it is preventing us from seeing our power clearly.

On the other hand, many critics are casting Israel, and the Jewish people, as the Chanukah story's Syrian Greeks – the massively resourced settler colonialist army coming to smash the indigenous people. But unlike the Syrian Greeks, we have no Syria or Greece. Unlike the Syrian Greeks, Israelis have nowhere to go. Israelis are from Israel or were expelled to Israel from countries around the world. Unlike the Syrian Greek army, the Israeli army is not fighting for empire. It is fighting for survival, to be able to live somewhere on the earth without an enemy that wants us dead. That's the goal. And given that we needed somewhere on the earth that could be a refuge from repeated massacres and attempts to annihilate us, the goal became to be able to live in peace on the land where our people are from. However, another people lived there and live there now, and have suffered greatly at our hands, and that is complicated. After two millennia of antisemitism soaking into human consciousness worldwide through Christianity, Islam, and Western thought, Israelis face a world that is practiced at seeing them (and us) as dangerously powerful, as dishonest, as bloodthirsty, and as truly evil. This is what gets us to the double standard Senator Schumer spoke about on the Senate floor last week. When bad things happen to us, a lot of the world shrugs and thinks it's kind of deserved. When we do bad things, a lot of the world sees further evidence of our evil. By the way, the exact same thing happens to Palestinians. When bad things happen to them, a lot of the world shrugs and thinks it's kind of deserved. When they do bad things, a lot of the world sees further evidence of their evil.

No, we are not the Syrian Greeks, but neither are we the Maccabees. The Chanukah story and all of the stories like it do not help us understand our power. We're not the colonizing imperial force. We're also not the underdog, we're not the little guy, we're not the younger brother. Israel has real power. The Jewish people have real power. This is difficult to talk about precisely because antisemitism casts us with much more power than we really have. Antisemitism casts us with world-controlling power, with secret

power, with conniving, deceptive, hidden, scheming power. So a part of us wants to deny or downplay our power.

But it is not moral, or preferable, to be powerless. This is something that was taught to me by Rabbi David Ellenson, alav hashalom, who died suddenly on Thursday and whose funeral will be tomorrow. I need a moment to tell you about Rabbi Ellenson. David Ellenson was a giant of our world, one of the most respected and loved – truly revered – rabbis of our generation. He was a brilliant teacher, a scholar, a leader who led with his big, big heart and his tears, a model human being. As the president of Hebrew Union College, he ordained me, and Cantor Breitzer and Rabbi Kolin. I will never forget the look in his eyes in that holy moment of s'micha, when he placed his hands on my head and spoke to me with tears rolling down his face. From the first time we met, he believed in me and made it clear. In that moment of ordination, I was crying too, and we stood there in front of a full sanctuary for a long time looking into each other's eyes, crying, as he told me what a fine rabbi I would be, and he blessed me and kissed me on my forehead, and that is how I became a rabbi. Over the years I got the chance to talk with him many times and felt close to him, as many did. He was here at CBE for my installation even though he wasn't the speaker. He just wanted to show up for me. Tonight I'll have the opportunity to show up for him by practicing shmira, by sitting and watching over his body as a way of honoring him before his burial.

Twenty years ago, when I was living in Jerusalem for my first year of rabbinical school, Rabbi Ellenson came to visit our class. He taught us then about power. He talked about how some Jews in diaspora have a certain nostalgia or idealization of the time when the Jewish people were powerless. When we did not have a state or an army, so we could never be accused of oppressing anyone. In this fantasy, it is simpler and purer not to have power, even if it does make you the victim, even if it might lead to your annihilation. At least you're always the good guy, the innocent, the unblemished. But that is not right, Rabbi Ellenson taught us. That is only a fantasy. It is not moral to be powerless. You need some power in order to

make choices, and you need to be able to make choices in order to be moral.

In addition, powerlessness does not protect you from immorality. Relatively powerless people can still do terrible things. The most recent example is October 7th. Further, you can be powerless and innocent and still be blamed. Witness the Holocaust. That's why it's so important to remember that the ideal, the goal must not be powerlessness. One's ability to be moral increases with one's power. The more power, the more choices and the more impact those choices have; the more choices, the greater the ability to make good ones. The goal of the left, the goal of progressives, should be to make everyone more powerful and to make power relations more equal, not to idealize the purity of powerlessness.

Now I'm going to say something complicated. To be a spiritual person in the world, we need to hold two contradictory truths simultaneously. On the one hand, to be in relationship with G-d is to recognize our utter powerlessness, how much we do not have control over. On the other hand, to be a moral actor in the world is to recognize and take responsibility for our power. Both are relative and both are real.

The Jewish people, like every other people, should have power. The Jewish people should have enough power to defend and protect ourselves and to govern ourselves. Israel should have that power, and Israel *does* have that power. That is good. However, in the last 75 years, Israel has developed power that is dramatically disproportionate to the power held by the Palestinian people. Disproportionate power is dangerous, because disproportionate power is likely to be abused. The more disproportionate the power, the more easily you can do damage. And that is the position Israel finds itself in.

We, who were relatively powerless for 2000 years, such that all of the stories of David and Goliath and slaves crossing the sea and the Maccabees were perfectly resonant for our ancestors even as the world fed

itself on ideas of our secret disproportionate powers, now find ourselves with actual disproportionate power over another people.

With power there is of course not only the possibility of doing great good but also the possibility of doing great harm. That is why we are all safer and better off when power is more equally distributed. The more disproportionate the power, the more care must be given to every choice about the use of that power. Great restraint is necessary with disproportionate power. The more disproportionate the power, the larger the responsibility for every life impacted by that power.

Last week, +972 magazine published a report based on interviews with seven current and former Israeli intelligence and air force officials, including those involved in the early bombing of Gaza, that if true, demonstrates a severe breach of that responsibility. According to the report, Israel's bombing intentionally included what they called "power targets": flattening high-rises and residential towers in the heart of cities, in order to create a shock on civilians to pressure Hamas. Half of all targets in the first five days of bombing were power targets. The intelligence sources said that every target focused on a Hamas operative, and the IDF does drop fliers telling people to evacuate, whereas Hamas is actually trying to kill civilians. However, in the past, according to IDF rules, power targets could only be hit when they were emptied of civilians, but according to this report those rules were not entirely followed in this war. These sources also said that the IDF knew how many civilians they were killing. An anonymous Israeli intelligence source said, "Nothing happens by accident...Everything is intentional. We know exactly how much collateral damage there is in every home." Another anonymous source said, "The numbers increased from dozens of civilian deaths [permitted] as collateral damage as part of an attack on a senior official in previous operations, to hundreds of civilian deaths as collateral damage." IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari said on October 9, "While balancing accuracy with the scope of damage, right now we're focused on what causes maximum damage."

Israel has the right and the responsibility to bring back the hostages, to pursue Hamas and to kill its leaders. But in the process, because it has recklessly used its disproportionate power over the Palestinian people, Israel has killed many many thousands of Gazans, 40% of them children. According to UN data, in one month, at least 312 families lost 10 or more people. At least 189 families lost between six and nine people. At least 549 families lost between two and five people. Imagine that. 1.7 million people are displaced. They are hungry and thirsty, and vulnerable to a massive disease outbreak. Disproportionate power is extremely dangerous. Disproportionate power requires enormous restraint. Disproportionate power leads to terrible terrible outcomes if not held with the greatest of care. And in Gaza it has.

This week US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said "It is imperative – it remains imperative – that Israel put a premium on civilian protection, and there does remain a gap between ... the intent to protect civilians, and the actual results that we're seeing on the ground... Israel has an obligation to do everything possible to put a premium on protecting civilians and maximizing humanitarian assistance." The Israeli army must stop all indiscriminate killing. It must stop killing innocent civilians. Now.

As you said, Jack, eliminationist speech and actions never solve the problem of a conflict. It is not only murderous, it is suicidal. Getting rid of the other side doesn't work, because as you said, "doing something wrong only makes things worse." Neither side is going anywhere, and every act of indiscriminate killing only creates more guilt and more trauma, which are obstacles to the diplomacy and healing that are required on the day after.

Yedioth Ahronoth's Nahum Barnea wrote last week. "The IDF will enter Khan Yunis with no plan for the day after. That is perhaps good as an act of revenge, not as a course of action that serves a strategy. It will enter an area filled with evacuees from the northern Gaza Strip, homeless, without shelter. They will be joined by Khan Yunis residents who were called on, in IDF leaflets, to move south, toward Rafah. The data issued daily by the UN indicates a growing danger of epidemics and a humanitarian disaster ...

Hamas must be dealt a blow that will deny it capabilities—no one disputes that. The IDF cannot skip over the terrorist stronghold in Khan Yunis. But there will be no victory there: better to lower expectations and get as quickly as possible to the process of healing and rehabilitation, first and foremost, the hostages' return.”

Even disproportionate power, if exercised with great care, can be applied for good. Instead of using its power to maximize damage, Israel's power should be focused on the hostages' return. Instead of using its power to allow settlers to run wild in the West Bank, to steal land, bully, and kill, Israel should use its disproportionate power to police and imprison those settlers, and to pull all the settlers back inside Israel proper to enable a Palestinian state. Instead of using its power to prop up Hamas, as this government has done, Israel should use its disproportionate power to free and support a Palestinian leadership that can negotiate a two state solution – not in some distant future, but now.

Knesset Member and Reform rabbi Gilad Kariv recently restarted the two-state caucus in the Knesset. It is a small group, but it includes members of the Labor Party, the Arab Joint List, Yesh Atid, and Benny Gantz's National Unity Party. Obviously, in many ways the Two State Solution sounds more far-fetched now than ever. But Kariv says, “The only way to secure the ability of the two national communities that are sharing the same piece of land to live in peace and prosperity is the two-state solution. The events of October 7 didn't change [that]. I'm not ignoring the fact that the current conflict places many emotional, psychological, and political obstacles ...At the same time, we know that ...after moments of crisis, after wars, after violence, there is also an opportunity to renew the political process.” We should insist on three principles, Kariv says: One, Hamas cannot control the Gaza Strip. Two, Israel will not re-control the lives of two million Palestinians. Three, with the involvement of the international community, the moderate Arab countries, we need to create a new civilian reality in the Gaza Strip that will promote a new political process between Israel and the Palestinians.”

The United States must use its much greater disproportionate power to insist on, to craft, to negotiate, and to establish a two state solution. Not as a dream for some future day, but today, now. Palestinians deserve the power to govern themselves, the power to be free, the power to protect and defend their own people. And Israelis deserve the power to live in peace, not as an occupier, not as a hated entity whose legitimacy is denied, but accepted as a sovereign nation defending, protecting, and nurturing its own citizens.

In our parasha, Joseph does not waste his time on revenge, but instead he builds toward the future. Judah, the more powerful brother who we're named for, begins to recognize his power and take responsibility for it. Two weeks from now, Judah will repent for the grief he caused his father, he will use his power to stand up for his littlest brother, and he will reconcile with the brother he harmed. All of this – repentance, moral use of power, and reconciliation – are possible for our people.

Over the last decades, the light of the two state solution has gone out, as the intifadas, the settler agenda, and extremists on both sides have made it seem impossible. But Chanukah comes with new light in the darkness. Chanukah means rededication, and each light we light is our pledge that we will not give up. With each light we rededicate ourselves to freedom. With each light we rededicate ourselves to the moral use of power. With each light we rededicate ourselves to peace.

Chag Urim Sameach.
Shabbat Shalom.