

Va-Yishlach is a remarkable Torah portion, all the more remarkable for its relation to what has been happening in our world over the last two months.

- A few weeks ago in our Torah readings (Parashat Toldot), after Jacob stole Esau's birthright, Rebekkah warned Jacob - stay away, leave here until your brother's fury subsides and he forgets what happened.
- This week, years later in the story, Jacob is ordered by G-d to return home, and he does so, sending out messengers to Esau to start negotiations because he so fears him.
- In anticipation of this meeting, Jacob wrestles with a man, a divine being and determines his identity as Israel and our future identity as the people Israel.
- Then brother faces brother, leery of one another but embracing, and they play out a cautious peace.
- In close proximity to this peace, Dinah, Jacob's daughter, is raped by a man named Sh'chem, and Jacob's sons brutally slay the rapist and his whole clan.
- Rachel has another child, Benjamin, and dies in childbirth, and the 12 sons / tribes of Israel are spelled out. And Jacob's father Isaac dies, too.
- Esau's lineage is spelled out, including 12 tribes, parallel to the tribes of Israel, and Amalek, the hereditary enemy of Israel.

It is impossible for me not to see parallels to our current times.

- Israel, the country, was born into conflict, its own birthright constantly contended.
- After decades of mistrust, anxiety, and fear, Israel has made peace and was on the cusp of making further peace with its neighbors, our biblical and genetic brothers and sisters, through agreements like the Abraham Accords and the proposed Israel-Saudi agreement.
- In the midst of this evolving peace, Israel experiences a horrific paroxysm of violence, an atrocity, followed by a retaliation.
- Israel makes reference to Amalek wanting to expunge this evil from the world, part of a devastating cycle of violence.

The seven days of peace that expired two days ago was a relief to Jews and to Palestinians, a chance for both peoples to rejoice in *mativ asurim*, freeing the captives, and a chance for me,

and perhaps many of you, to cease our doom-scrolling and, perhaps, read stories of reunion and the scant beginnings of healing. With the return of hostilities comes the return of anxiety.

This has been a war that has challenged many of us in unexpected ways - we have experienced separation from previously trusted allies in our work for equity for all peoples, we have experienced unexpected silence in the workplace, incommensurate with the messages that have come out at other times and other tragedies; we have felt our Judaism under attack, even those of us who wear our Judaism most secularly; and we have experienced schism in our own communities and families as we position ourselves along an axis ranging from fury and righteous anger at the abominations and atrocities of Hamas to abhorrence and horror at the devastation wrought in response.

Many of us feel close kinship with Jacob as we wrestle with all that is happening.

I've gone to two rallies to call for the return of the hostages, one in Raleigh and one in Washington, DC. It was a wonderful feeling to stand in solidarity with my fellow Jews and advocate that everything possible be done to bring home the Israelis and other foreign nationals taken by Hamas. But I felt disquiet at conversations about "just" wars and at vociferous chants of "No Cease Fire!" at the Washington rally. At the outset of the war, my mom, a Holocaust survivor who lost her parents and was a hidden child in France during the war, saw only violence and victims, and my children feared for the sure-to-be coming wrath of Israel, based on the Jewish ethics they trace to their upbringing in this congregation.

At our Board of Directors, this wrestling took the form of thoughtful meetings that have wisely said, "The moment of grief, anger, and righteous indignation is not a good time to make decisions; it is, however, a good time to listen." As a group, we met and expressed what we were feeling within the first 10 days of the war. I can tell you that we did not speak with one voice, and in a very good way. It was instructive to hear the range of feelings on the Board and the depth of compassion for all innocents affected in this conflict. I credit Aron Silverstone and Rabbi Soffer with taking this tack - By starting this discussion with "I" language rather than focusing on a decision, it helped to reduce the echo chamber, the tendency toward listening only to words that backed up our own views and it made clear that the Board at Judea Reform does not tend toward groupthink.

In early November, Judea's Board of Trustees issued a statement whose timing and content reflects some of that wrestling. Its timing - 3 weeks after the fighting broke out, reflecting the need to process, its content reflecting the compassion of this community. The statement expressed outrage and heartbreak over the violence affecting innocent people. It expressed compassion for all, support for Palestinian rights, consistent with longstanding sentiments in this synagogue and in the Union of Reform Judaism, it promised action to support healing, and it acknowledged the personal and family struggles that many of us are engaged in.

And at every Shabbat since the outbreak of hostilities, Rabbis Soffer and Damsky and Zemmer Alan have been inclusive in leading our congregation's prayers for shelter, healing and in mourning. We also know, however, that prayers, demonstrations, and letters in the Triangle will not determine the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At this time, our goal is to support healing and to keep alive a dialogue within our complicated local Jewish community, to make sure that our hearts and our doors remain open.

With respect to healing, we have formed a direct connection with Kibbutz Nir Oz that suffered so deeply from Hamas' attack. We have created tzedakah opportunities and supported Rabbi Soffer's courageous trip to Nir Oz, to this war zone, to meet with survivors, to stand where they stood, and to build the relationships that will allow us to focus our community assistance.

With respect to dialogue and the healing that comes with that, we are still working toward building forums to hear the questions that our community is asking and to help each other answer the difficult questions that we meet in public and family discussion. Many of these questions are rooted in our ethics of seeking peace and of the sanctity of a single life, of all life:

- Even if there is justification for war, is it the only path that could be taken?
- Are we that limited in our thinking, especially following the gross failure of the 20 year-long war following the 9/11 attacks to expunge radicalism and broad acknowledgement of the horrendous failure to govern by the current Israeli government?
- Is the destruction of Gaza and the death of innocents really the only path that could be taken?

These are difficult discussions that come up with others inside and outside the Jewish community.

There are some steps we can take as we enter into them:

- 1) Interrogate our own thoughts and actions
 - a) What are the roots of your strong feelings? I was at an environmental justice meeting on Thursday and I'll admit, I felt myself triggered by the presence of a woman wearing a keffiyeh around her neck - What are the reasons for this? Is there another valid way to think about this?
- 2) Start as the Board started - Begin by asking questions
 - a) And suspend judgment so that you can hear evidence that backs views different from the ones we might hold
 - b) Share insights and information - Are different ideas really in conflict?
 - i) For example, at the start of this talk, I described an axis ranging from fury and righteous anger at the abominations and atrocities of Hamas to abhorrence and horror at the devastation wrought in response.
 - ii) I think that these are two ideas we can hold at the same time as we try to find another way.
 - c) Has the dialogue supplied answers to questions that filled in gaps in knowledge? Do we and others have strengths we can share?
- 3) Be willing to contradict what has always been done - Don't we love to question authority?

These discussions have helped to defuse tensions in my family and have helped me to learn and to be willing to ask some hard questions to myself.

Being able to have these discussions is critical to the continued growth and engagement with Jews, especially young adults, many of whom are devastated and disillusioned with what is being attached to their Jewish identities. This is a difficult truth, but these are the strategic questions that were wrestling with before this war and will continue to do so - what is our relationship with Israel as Reform American Jews: how can we explore and develop new and creative ways to learn about, discuss, and engage with Israel. Where is congregational Judaism going? How expansive will we allow our Jewish thoughts and dreams to be?

מה טובו אהלֵיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל, On this day in our liturgical year, we wrestle with what we usually take as a platitude: “How goodly is your tent, Jacob, your dwelling, Israel?” Your Board knows, our Rabbi knows, and our staff knows that Judea Reform’s tent is big enough to build a community of understanding and relationships within our own Jewish community here in North Carolina, and we see that as our task ahead.

Shabbat shalom.