

## ***Swords and Bows***

### *Parashat Vayechi*

December 18, 2021; 14 Tevet 5782

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A number of years ago, my son Ezra was out at his very first sleep over at a friend's house. This friend had invited a bunch of middle school boys over to spend the night hanging out, eating junk food, watching movies, and playing video games. About an hour after I dropped Ezra off I got a very strange text message from him. Abba, he said, they have real swords! Real swords? What does that mean? Hanging on the wall in the basement, he answered. Real metal swords! Immediately I went to a bad place in my mind...I imagined these rambunctious kids deciding to have a sword fight, taking the swords down off the wall, acting like a bunch of pirates, and then God-forbid, accidentally stabbing each other. I was freaked-out. Sari was out of town, and I called her and said, "What do I do? Do I go pick him up immediately? Do I call the parents? Am I overreacting?" I was having a panic attack. Before I had to make a decision about instantly ending this sleep over, I got another call that Ezra had a tummy ache and needed to be picked up. I raced over in my car, went down into the basement of this house to help him gather-up his belongings, and as I stepped over bags of chips and empty cans of grape soda I understood exactly why his stomach hurt. And I saw those crossed swords, with metal blades hanging right there on the wall, just as Ezra said they were!

I had a flashback of that story when I stumbled upon a detail of the parasha this week that I had never noticed before. As Jacob bestows his deathbed blessings upon each of his sons, he begins with Joseph, saying:

*Va'ani natati l'cha Shechem...asher lakachti miyad ha'Emori be'charbi u'vekashti*

To you Joseph, I give the city of Shechem...which I took from the Amorites with my sword and bow.<sup>1</sup>

If you recall, Shechem is the city where Dina, the daughter of Jacob was assaulted and raped in Genesis chapter 34. It is also the city that Dina's brothers Shimon and Levi attacked in retribution, putting every male in town to death *lefi charev*, with their swords, and taking all their animals, wealth, wives, and children as booty. It's a wild, terrible story of violence and revenge. But here's the kicker as it relates to this week's parasha...Jacob was totally against this vigilantism. Jacob was furious at his sons, you have brought trouble upon me, he thunders at them; you turned all the Canaanites against me. What if they unite and attack me! Check it out in Genesis 34:30. Jacob was utterly opposed to attacking the city of Shechem. But in our parasha, not only does he not seem opposed, he claims to have actually fought in the battle; he says he took up arms...it was not Shimon and Levi, but Jacob himself who defeated Shechem *be'charbi u'vekashti*, with his sword and his bow.

This apparent contradiction poses a bit of a problem for our Sages of blessed memory. How would they reconcile these diametrically opposite accounts? Rashi says that when Shimon and Levi invaded Shechem, all the surrounding Canaanite towns came to their defense, so Jacob indeed had to suit up and fight in the battle with his sword and bow. But there is another fascinating interpretation by the ancient Bible translator, Onkelos. Onkelos was a Roman citizen in the first century who converted to Judaism, and subsequently translated the Torah into Aramaic, the spoken language of the day. In his translation, the words *be'charbi u'vekashti*, with my sword and bow, are rendered in Aramaic as *bitzloti*

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 41:51

*u'vauti*, with “my prayers and supplications.” According to Onkelos, Jacob did not physically go into battle with his two sons, but he joined them, as it were, by praying and asking God to protect them. I’m not sure how this ancient translator developed this idea, but I find it very meaningful.

I know that a lot of people, a lot of Jews struggle with prayer. It can even feel like going into battle sometimes: certainly if we are tired or distracted or not particularly in the mood. I know for some people there are plenty of other barriers to meaningful prayer: like the language, the melodies, having enough *zitzfleish*...right, it’s hard to sit still for so long! Sometimes prayer demands more of us than other times. And I’m not talking about Yom Kippur versus a regular weekday.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, a leading 19<sup>th</sup> century Lithuanian rabbi also known as the Meshech Chochma sees a powerful connection between prayer and swords and bows.<sup>2</sup>

If you know anything about archery, you know that it’s not only about accuracy; it’s also about strength. It takes a lot of muscle in your arms and back and shoulders and core to pull the bow and get enough tension to send that arrow flying. Sometimes prayer is like that too, says the Meshech Chochma. We need to put in a lot of effort. I imagine that Jacob had to do this when praying for his sons. He didn’t agree with what they were doing. He had to set aside his anger, his frustration and remember that they were his flesh and blood, and that even though they were utterly defying his wishes, he prayed that they would come home safe. How many of you have come here and said prayers for a family member or loved one who is way off track, and you *davven* that they’ll find their way and be okay. Sometimes we have to sort through competing feelings when we pray. We may not be sure that anyone is listening, or if prayer even works. I heard about a rabbi whose son came to shul with him every week. Every Shabbat before giving his sermon the rabbi would kiss the doors of the ark. One Shabbat on the way home from shul the son turned to his father and asked, “Why do you kiss the ark every week right before you give your sermon?” His father the rabbi said, “Well, I say a little prayer when I do that my sermon will be a good one.” “Oh,” said the son, “so I guess God really doesn’t answer all of our prayers.” Who knows if anyone is listening, or if or how I will get a response to my prayers. For me, there has been no greater tension in my prayer life than Zoom. It stretches me almost to my limit and takes every ounce of my strength and focus to remain connected. Each of us have constrictions that make prayer difficult...some of them philosophical, others atmospheric. The goal is to build up the muscle to pull the bow back anyway.

Swords, on the other hand, are intrinsically potent. If you touch them the wrong way, run into them, mishandle them, they can be rather “penetrating!” That’s why I was so terrified when my little Ezra called from his sleepover to tell me there were machetes hanging on the wall! The Meshech Chochma says that some prayers are like swords...meaning we don’t have to do much for them to “work” or be effective. At joyous moments in our lives, our lips are dripping with Thank God, Baruch Hashem, Halleluyah...At those times when we are so thankful, it’s easy to pray, easy to say a bracha, isn’t it?! It’s seems so natural to express gratitude, joy, celebration. For me, whenever I am praying with other Jews, my prayers are infinitely more meaningful than when I am either alone, or staring at zoom windows on a screen. *Tefillah be’tzibbur*, communal prayer is transformative for me. I love it. I hardly have to do anything for it to be deeply meaningful. I actually require less *kavannah*, less focus and intentionality,

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<sup>2</sup> Meshech Chochma, Vayechi 12 [“*Be’charbi u’vekashti...*”]

when I am praying with all of you than when I am praying alone. Nothing cuts through the distractions for me more than being a part of a community.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in his stirring introduction to the Koren Sacks Siddur: “Prayer requires practice. That is implicit in defining payer as *avodah sh’balev*, ‘the service of the heart.’ The word *avoda*, service, also means hard work, labor, strenuous activity. We have to work at prayer. But there are also times when the most inarticulate prayer, said from the heart, pierces the heavens. What matters is seriousness and honesty.”<sup>3</sup> Or as our patriarch Jacob taught us, sometimes we need swords and sometimes bows. Either way, remember the words we recite in *Ashrei*, God is near to all who call upon God with sincerity, God is near to all those who pray with authenticity.<sup>4</sup> May each of you find the words and the presence to do just that.

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<sup>3</sup> The Koren Shalem Siddur (Lobel Edition, For Weekdays, Shabbat, and Hagim); Introduction, Translation, and Commentary by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, 2017, p. xlvii

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 145:18