

Sermon | Parshat Vayetzei
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The Strength We Need

It was not lost on me that yesterday marked 49 days of Israel at war. That number is significant in Judaism. Forty-nine are the days of *Sefirat Ha'Omer*, the seven week period in which we count each day between Passover and Shavuot. This time is marked by solemnity, remembering the Talmudic narrative in which a plague ravaged the students of Rabbi Akiva. The *Omer* is also the transitional period from redemption to revelation, from Egypt to Sinai. Forty-nine are the years of the Jubilee cycle, which prompted a sort of reset of the ancient Israelite economy. For Jews, forty-nine is a span of time that we are accustomed to marking, in days and in years. When we reach 50, things are supposed to change. They are supposed to get better, or reset, or transition to a new reality. With the release yesterday of 24 of the 240 hostages, including 13 Israeli women and children, things have certainly gotten better, both for the families of those individuals and for us all. Of course, we still yearn for the release of the hundreds of other captives in Gaza, and we continue to pray for their safety and wellbeing. And at the same time, the returning home of 24 hostages offers the hope and the strength that we need to continue forward. We know that this war is not over—the Israeli government has promised that it will not end until Hamas is dismantled and all of the hostages are returned home. We hope that more hostages will be released in the coming days, but how this unfolds and what happens next is uncertain. That uncertainty is not new; it has been plaguing us for these past 49 days. But now we have a renewed sense of *tikvah*, hope for a better future for the families of the hostages, and for all of Israel. Parshat Vayetzei demonstrates to us the power of

these moments of hope, which provide us with the strength that we need to take that next step forward in uncertain times.

The parsha narrates Jacob's flight to Haran, to the birthplace of his mother and his grandparents. This is where he meets his beloved Rachel. This is where his uncle, Lavan, tricks him into first marrying Leah, and only later marrying Rachel. This is where he toils for many years. This is where 12 of his 13 children are born. And this is where everything seems to suddenly change. After all of this, the birth of Jacob's son Joseph has a tremendous impact upon him. Jacob declares his intention to return to his homeland; no longer will he stay with Lavan and serve him. Finally, it is time to go home. He says to Lavan, **שְׁלַח־נִי וְאֶלְכָה אֶל־מְקוֹמִי וְלֵאדָרְצִי**, "Let me go back to my place, to my homeland."¹ This is what we have been demanding for the past 49 days for the hostages taken by Hamas to Gaza. Finally, a few of them were granted this much sought after permission to go home. This is what Jacob demanded of Lavan thousands of years ago: to return to Israel with his family so that they could begin anew. And we continue to demand it for all of those held captive even today.

But why did Joseph's birth prompt Jacob to seek the family's return to his homeland? Based on earlier rabbinic texts, Rash says that Jacob understood Joseph's birth as the *beginning* of the fulfillment of a prophecy. Generations later, the prophet Ovadiah would say, "The House of Jacob shall be fire, **שֹׁא**, and the House of Joseph flame, **לֶהֱבֵה**, and the House of Esau shall be straw, **לֶקֶשׁ**. They shall burn it and devour it, and no survivor shall be left of the House of Esau—for God has spoken."² That combination of fire and flame, of Jacob and Joseph, is necessary to

¹ Genesis 30:25.

² Obadiah 1:18.

consume the straw, Esau. The forces of good combine to wipe out the specter of evil. Esau would no longer be a threat to Jacob now that Joseph is part of the story. Jacob knew of this prophecy, and therefore Joseph's birth prompts him to trust in God and demand that they all return home. He no longer fears that Esau will be a threat to him at home, for the prophecy promises that good will destroy evil, that Israel will stand strong in the face of Esau. Joseph's birth provides Jacob with the strength and the hope that he needs to take that next critical step in his life, demanding that his father-in-law allow him to return to his homeland with his wives and his children.

This is not the only time in Jacob's life when he receives the encouragement that he needs to go on. At the very beginning of the *parsha*, he flees from his homeland because Esau is pursuing him. Then, Jacob has his famous dream with the angels ascending and descending on the divine ladder stretching from earth to the heavens. When he wakes up the next morning, the Torah tells us, וַיִּשָּׂא יַעֲקֹב רַגְלָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶרֶצָה בְּנִי־קְדָם, "Jacob lifted his feet and came to the land of the Easterners."³ That is a very strange phrase, וַיִּשָּׂא רַגְלָיו "he lifted his feet," and it does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. There are much easier ways to say "he went" or "he walked on" in Hebrew. Once again, Rashi offers a *midrash* to explain the verse, "As soon as Jacob received the good news, *besorah tova*, that he was assured of God's protection, his heart lifted up his feet and he walked swiftly." Reinvigorated after being reassured of God's divine protection, Jacob's spirits are lifted and he is able to take that next step forward with ease. When we hear good news, we too are given the hope that things will get better. We are inspired that a better future awaits. It does not mean that the work is done, or that we have

³ Genesis 29:1.

nothing to fear. But it does mean that we have the strength, the fortitude, the hope, and the courage to continue on.

We are living in such terribly uncertain times. I know that my anxiety was higher this week than it has been recently. For a few weeks we lived with the status quo. However, with the announcement of a deal to release hostages, the anxiety that I felt during those first few weeks of this war returned. *Who* would be released? What would be their *condition*? Would it actually happen? And what would happen to the hundreds of *other* captives still held by terrorists in Gaza? And then I saw the video of the Red Cross ambulances with hostages crossing the border into Egypt. I teared up watching it. I reread the stories of how these individuals were ripped from their families, and are now, thank God, back home in Israel. Finally, some of our Israeli brothers and sisters are reunited with their families who have waited a harrowing seven weeks to hear anything at all about their condition. The great *mitzvah* of *pidyon shvuyim*, the redemption of captives, is finally being upheld. Israelis are coming home. This is the strength that we all need to keep us going. In a moment of despair, when our collective national anxiety as a Jewish people is at its peak, we have finally received *besorot tovot*, the good news for which we have been praying each day. They are coming home.

That phrase, *besorot tovot*, “good news,” is how many Israelis and others in the Jewish community have signed their emails during these seven weeks. The phrase echoes Rashi and the “good news” that Jacob received during his dream: that God would protect him on the difficult journey ahead. The signature is really a prayer, “May we hear good news.” Yesterday, that prayer was answered. We have *besorot tovot*; we have good news. May this good news continue. May we feel a renewed sense of hope and strength. May all of the hostages be safely

returned to their families. May Israel speedily defeat Hamas. May there be peace in our homeland for all of its inhabitants. Shabbat shalom.