

We Cannot Afford to Wait – Toldot 5775

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I was 22 years old when I got married, and plenty of people asked why I was rushing. Why not wait until I finished school, established myself, got a little more settled? My rabbi told me about another couple he was counseling before their wedding. They were in their mid-30s and had been living together for over 9 years, and the rabbi asked why it was that after they had been together for so long, they wanted to get married *now*? And the answer was instructive. “Well,” said the groom, “We always knew that we wanted to get married, but when we first started thinking about it my father was ill, and so we decided the time wasn’t right. And then, after a year or two, I was having some trouble with my business, and so we thought it would be better to wait. And then my girlfriend wanted to go back to school and we thought it would be difficult to plan a wedding while. And there were other situations, until we finally realized: There is no such thing as ‘the right time’. This is how life is and we don’t want to wait anymore because we have already waited too long.”

I’m sure others can relate. We wait to study Torah because we think our schedules might open up ... in a little while. We wait to have children because we imagine that eventually it will get easier. Politicians wait until after the election because they think the dynamics will change. We wait and we wait and we wait ... and it’s a fool’s errand because things never get easier, life never slows down, there is never a better time, and so the message is that we need to do the things that are important to us now. The dynamics aren’t going to change as much as we think.

I was playing with this idea in my head at the beginning of the week, when I heard the news of the horrific attack in the Har Nof section of Jerusalem, where terrorists entered a synagogue around 7:15, at the tail end of the morning service, and started shooting. Five people died.

A few facts about Har Nof: The name means “Mountain with a View”; it is a hill on the western side of Jerusalem, near the entrance to the city. This is nowhere near East Jerusalem or Occupied Territories; the people who live there are not radical ultra-nationalist settlers. The community is ultra-Orthodox, and there is a lot of English spoken on the streets. I have a close family friend who studied in Yeshiva in Israel and now lives in that neighborhood and he had actually worshipped in that synagogue the night before the attack. My maternal grandparents are buried in Givat Shaul, adjacent to Har Nof.

The news brought me back to the horrors of the summer and the War in Gaza to uproot the terror tunnels and deliver security to Israeli citizens. Many wished at the time that the army would keep fighting and “finish the job”. Somehow, they imagined, we could do something to get rid of the other side forever. We don’t like to admit it, but the sad truth is that that wish is impossible. We can protect; we can react; but we can’t make the other side disappear.

Parashat Toldot, which we just read, described Rebecca’s pregnancy, which led to the births of Jacob and Esau. “ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה”, The children struggled in her womb, and she said, ‘If so, why do

I exist?” She sought guidance from the Lord and was told, “שני גוים בבטן, Two nations are in your womb, There are two peoples who will emerge from your body and separate; One people shall be mightier than the other; and the older shall serve the younger.” Rabbinic interpretation traditionally connected Esau with Christianity and the Roman Empire, but I read the text this week in light of our modern struggle. Two nations are in this womb; it is a fact of life that they will struggle, but they are destined to share a single, small home.

The oracle includes a promise that the children of Jacob will eventually win, but that is in the very distant future. In the near term, the *parasha* ends with nobody happy. Esau is disinherited and Isaac is distraught. Rebecca is forced to send her beloved Jacob away to face an uncertain future on his own.

The entire Bible can be read to impart the message that although we may dream about a future promise of victory, life is to be lived in the not-always-happy realities of the present. Abraham is promised that his descendants will settle in the land of Israel ... but first they will be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years. Jacob returns from his exile and “settles” in the land, but soon his family follows Joseph down to Egypt. Moses leads the people out of Egypt, but he never makes it to the Promised Land. His descendants build a Temple in Jerusalem, and then another Temple, but they are destroyed and Judaism lives on in other lands. The modern State of Israel is a miraculous achievement of return, but it is hardly the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise or the messianic dream. Israel is real; and in the real world we have to deal with our challenges as they are and not as we wish they might be. שני גוים בבטן, There are two peoples in this womb, and we can’t afford to wait until that reality has changed.

If you are considering a trip to Israel and are thinking about waiting until “things calm down,” don’t wait. Make your plans to go now.

To those who think that Israel’s societal issues like religious pluralism, the monopoly of the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, the widening gap between rich and poor, the allocation of resources between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens – that these issues are less important than the Palestinian issue, I say “Don’t wait”. Reality is reality, and these issues matter now.

To the politicians who wish that all the violence might end before we can think about a political path towards peace, I say we cannot afford to wait. The reality is that Israel is our homeland, the fulfillment of the national destiny of the Jewish people who have a right to live in security and dignity; AND there are two peoples who must share this land and neither is able to negate the reality of the other.

In the Jewish folk tradition, there is a fictional town in Poland, the town of Chelm, which is known for its wise men. It is said that during one particularly hot summer, the wise men sat in their deliberation room to try to figure out how to get rid of their heat problem for good. They thought and they thought, but they could not find a solution to the problem of the hot summer in Chelm, until, after about a week, one scholar came forward.

“You know,” he said, “We in Chelm have a big problem because the summer has become too hot. But it seems that we also have another problem because in the winter it is always too cold. And I believe that these problems are actually connected. In the winter, you see, we turn our furnaces and ovens on overtime to save us from the cold. And over time we produce a surplus of heat because of all those furnaces, which gets to be so bad that every summer we experience high temperatures. And then in the summer we turn on all our fans, which cool the air so much that we end up with a terrible winter! To end this vicious cycle,” he continued, “We need to turn off all our fans and turn on our ovens so that when winter comes it will be warm in Chelm. Then we can turn the fans back on in the winter. We may be a bit uncomfortable now, but I promise, in the future, it will all be better.” With that, the people became so excited because another one of their problems had been solved.

It’s a silly story, but I think on some level we have all been guilty of that mindset, which says that I can put off what I need to do or what I want to do now because things will be different in the future. The Torah’s message, though, is not to wait for the future; we have to find ways to deal with difficult problems in the present. To our enemies who believe that time is on their side, I proclaim in the strongest terms possible that Am Yisrael Chai, the People of Israel lives and we are not going anywhere. And to those who believe that we can afford to wait ... well, the sad reality is that we cannot wait too long either.

In tribute to those innocents who fell to the hands of terror, let us resolve to live. Let us maintain faith in the future while determining to live with the realities of the present. Let us wait no longer to do those things that need to be done today. I pray that we may be privileged to soon experience a different reality where שני גוים בבטן, the two nations in a single womb may live side by side in peace. Shabbat Shalom.