

“A Difficult Week”
Parashat Vayishlach
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This was a difficult week -- maybe not for individual Jews, but for the Jewish People. Let me explain.

It began with a widely quoted speech -- which, if you haven't seen it, I encourage you to watch -- to the IAC in Florida.¹

What is the IAC? The IAC is the Israeli American Council, a group whose goal is to organize and marshal the influence of the growing number of “Israeli Americans,” that is, Israelis who've moved to this country and their children. (By the way, IAC estimates that 10% of all Jews in this country are Israeli-Americans.) Here is a logo explaining their primary concerns:



¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YlonD037SQ> .

The speaker -- who happened to be the President of the United States -- asserted that his audience would vote for him in the upcoming presidential election. Why? Was it because of his support for the State of Israel? His decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem? His decision to pull out of the “Iran Deal”?

No. The President told his audience that they would vote for him because they were afraid of what it would do to their pocketbooks to vote against him.² This of course echoes an old and very widespread antisemitic canard that Jews care only about money.

The speech included several other canards about Jews being clannish, seeking to influence politics with their money, etc.³

That was bad enough.

But there’s a part two. When asked to comment about the speech, when asked whether they found any of the antisemitic canards to be offensive, several members of the audience stated that it didn’t bother them, and that they still support the President “because he’s good for the economy” -- which seems, of course, only to confirm the truth of the canard.

So that was how the week began.

In the middle of the week came the latest eruption of violent anti-Semitism, this time in Jersey City, N.J. Again, there was the event itself, which was terribly disturbing, and which I need not describe.

² “[Y]ou have to vote for me; you have no choice. You’re not going to vote for Pocahontas, I can tell you that. (Laughter and applause.) You’re not going to vote for the wealth tax. “Yeah, let’s take 100 percent of your wealth away.” No, no. ... And you’re going to be my biggest supporters because you’ll be out of business in about 15 minutes, if they get it.” <https://tinyurl.com/tw7zwvy>.

³ See: <https://tinyurl.com/qpsnmfb>.

And then there was the reaction of some. I'm not speaking about the condemnations of the violence from governmental officials or from the Jewish community. They were heartening, and I'll have more to say about that. I'm speaking about the reaction from a number of residents in the neighborhood, which was really disturbing. Some of the residents in the neighborhood where Mindy Ferencz, the co-owner with her husband of the kosher market which was attacked, was gunned down along with an employee and a random customer, focused their ire not the *perpetrators* of the attack but "*the Jews*" for the explosion of violence. As one person put it plainly, "I blame the Jews! We never had a shooting like this until they came here."⁴

In between these two reminders of our vulnerability, the President signed an Executive Order that purports to make it easier to fight antisemitism on college campuses and elsewhere. But not every Jewish leader agrees that this Order was either necessary or helpful. And since this Order was understood -- perhaps intentionally -- to be political, it brought criticism as well as praise. And so, instead of *uniting* the Jewish community, the executive order only heightened a sense of vulnerability: that we are beset with hostility from without and we are beset by conflict within.

Was there any good news this week?

Well, yes: though this week reminds us that antisemitism is alive and well, it doesn't look as though it is going to be living at No. 10 Downing Street. Not just yet. And yet, already there are those who are blaming the Jews for Labour's defeat.⁵

As I said, these are tough times for the Jewish people.

Of course, everything is relative. Before we lose perspective, let's remember that notwithstanding our small numbers -- far smaller than most people realize -- it's far

⁴ See: <https://tinyurl.com/tms5gku> .

⁵ See: <https://tinyurl.com/woedg5e> .

safer to be a Jew today than perhaps at any time in history -- and that is saying a lot.

When I learned that a police officer -- Detective Joseph Seals, aged 40 and a father of five -- had been gunned down during that rampage on Wednesday -- a reminder of how dangerous it is to wear that blue uniform, and how much appreciation we owe to those who put it on day in and day out, not knowing -- *never* knowing -- if they're going to come home alive to their families when their shift comes to an end -- I thought back to the many times that we Jews have lived in places where governmental authorities *participated* in our persecution, indeed, *directed* it, rather than taking steps to prevent it. Here in America, for example, Jews may be the objects of individual acts of intolerance or prejudice, but law enforcement, representing our society as a whole, seeks our well-being, not our destruction, and our congregation -- along with many others -- benefits greatly from a warm partnership with law enforcement.

So antisemitism has reared yet again its ugly head. It seems to be all around us. What's our response? What *should* be our response -- to that?

I spoke about this on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.⁶ Things haven't changed since then. We need, obviously, to take all steps to protect ourselves. We have to call out antisemitism whenever and wherever we see it. We need to form alliances with the vast number of people who could be swayed by antisemitism, but who could also be swayed against it.

But is that enough? Hardly. There's more on our agenda. In fact, the essential item on our agenda is there as well, which is to focus on being the best Jews we can possibly be. That's the essence of our mission.

But what does that mean? There's not a simple answer to that question.

⁶ See:

https://images.shulcloud.com/13691/uploads/uploaded_documents/rabbis_sermon_rosh_hashanah_2019_day_one.pdf.

Let me explain. I've been teaching a class over the past few weeks on the classic debates and disagreements within the Jewish tradition. The thing about classic debates is that they don't go away. They may take on different forms in different generations, but they're always with us.

One of them is captured by a disagreement between two Talmudic sages, Rabbi Akiba and Ben Azzai. (You may recognize their names; they both appear in the Passover Haggadah.)

The two of them are addressing a simple question: What's the most important principle in the Torah? What's the verse that captures the essence of what Torah is all about?

Of course, they disagree!

Rabbi Akiba says, it's the verse in Leviticus chapter nineteen that says: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Ben Azzai, on the other hand, quotes the beginning of chapter five of Genesis, in which the text tells us that all humankind is descended from Adam. It may not be clear, at first, what the two positions represent.

To understand their disagreement, we have to look closely at the texts they're quoting. In its context, that familiar and lovely verse, "Love your neighbor as yourself," is referring to our obligation to love our fellow Jews. (The word "neighbor" doesn't mean what Mr. Rogers meant when he said, "Won't you be my neighbor?") Rabbi Akiba is saying, Jewish solidarity is primary. Love your fellow Jews. Everything follows from that. In response, Ben Azzai says, "Love all humanity, for we are all brothers and sisters. *That* is primary."

To clarify, lest you think that Rabbi Akiba *only* stands for loving Jews, or lest you think that the Torah does, recall that in that same chapter of Leviticus, chapter nineteen, in which we're told that we should love our fellow Jews as ourselves, we're also told that we should love the *ger* -- usually translated as the stranger, but probably referring to a resident alien, migrant or immigrant -- as ourselves, too. Think about that: the *stranger*, the *outsider*, the *immigrant*; the one whom you can definitely not describe as your neighbor. The Torah is explicit: *We should love*

them as ourselves! How many of us can honestly claim that we fulfill that *mitzvah*, that Jewish religious obligation, 100% of the time wholeheartedly?

On the other hand, how many of us can honestly claim that we fulfill the *mitzvah* to love our fellow Jews 100% of the time? How many of us are tempted to distance ourselves from Jews who dress differently from us, or whose beliefs differ from our own?

There's work for all of us in this regard as well.

So both Rabbi Akiba and Ben Azzai agree that we must love all Jews, and we must love all human beings. The only question is, what is the role of our Jewishness in *prioritizing* the objects of our love.

It's a great question. And we can think of a variety of circumstances in which that question arises. Let me just mention one, that we examined in class: How do we distribute our charitable funds at this time of year? How much goes to Jewish causes? How much goes to further all of humanity, regardless of their religious/ethnic identity?

Is it 60/40? Is it 50/50? Is it 100/0? If so, in which direction? Do those numbers change as we grow older? As our income level and economic security increase?

Some people feel that we shouldn't focus on Jewish charities at all. After all, no one's blood is redder than anyone else's. Others feel that we should give ALL of our resources to Jewish causes. After all, if we don't give to Jewish causes, who will? Most of us are in between those two camps.

In the Talmud, we're taught that when giving *tsedakah*, we should start with ourselves. That is, if we need the money, we should make use of it. We shouldn't go poor giving *tsedakah*. Then, we should support our parents, and then our children, and then our other relatives, and then we should support non-relatives.

In other words, we start with ourselves, our parents, our children, our other relatives, and we move outward from there.

The question is: *Where does the Jewish people fit into that hierarchy?*

Some might say that it is too parochial, too particularistic, to give *tsedakah* only to Jews. In response, we might ask, Do we have any hesitation favoring our *family* over others?

Everyone to whom I've ever asked this question has responded, "No." They have no problem prioritizing their family over non-family recipients of their charitable dollars. (Of course, Peter Singer, the Princeton ethicist, once said that he couldn't justify helping his mother over anyone else -- that is, until his mother became ill -- but he's a rather extreme outlier.)

And so why *wouldn't* we prioritize Jews over others? The answer must be, because we don't consider them family. For if we considered our fellow Jews to be family, then we would naturally prioritize them over others.

On the other hand, if we *only* care about our family, if we have no interest and feel no sense of obligation to give to others who are not members of our family, well, then, what are we? We're clearly not loving strangers as ourselves. We're clearly not fulfilling what the Torah says we should do.

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This past week, I spent a very stimulating three or four days at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism convention in the Seaport area of Boston.

It was terrific. People were sharing all sorts of interesting and important ideas about what our mission is and should be going forward. There were lots of tips for synagogue leaders, whether they be lay leaders or professionals. Each night there was a great concert of new music coming out of young, creative Jewish musicians.

These were Jewish leaders focusing on the positive, focusing on the future. Yes, there was attention paid to the antisemitic "static" all around us, but our focus was on the essence of our mission.

So there was good news this past week.

And there will be good news in the upcoming weeks as well. On January 5th, over 300,000 Jews will gather to celebrate the completion of the study of the Talmud. Over a period of about 7 ½ years, at a rate of one page a day, hundreds of thousands of Jews have studied the Talmud. Each one of us can do something like that. If studying the Talmud at a rate of one page a day seems too daunting, well, what about reading the book of Psalms, at a rate of one psalm a day. At that rate, we can finish the book in five months. And we can move on from there.

We owe it to ourselves and to the Jewish future to strengthen our Jewish literacy (i.e., to study Torah) and to practice Judaism (i.e., to pursue *mitzvot*). There isn't one and only one pathway. But one thing we can say about proper Torah pathways: *Dracheha darchei noam, vkhol netivoteha shalom* (Proverbs 3:17). Torah pathways must be *pleasant* and *peaceful* ones. If someone proposes to you a *contentious, disrespectful* pathway marked by *disdain* for those who disagree with him or her -- well, that is not a Torah pathway.

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And so, my response to this spurt of antisemitism that we see increasingly all around us is straightforward: we should, of course, begin by taking pains to protect ourselves -- but we should go much further than that.

We should redouble our efforts to be the best Jews we can possibly be. We should respond to hatred with energy, enthusiasm, commitment and *love*: love for our tradition and our way of life; love for our fellow Jews; and love for each and every human being.

Shabbat shalom.