

Wells of “Contention” and “Hostility”—or of “Wide Open Spaces”

Parashat Toldot

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There is a story of conflict told in our parashah which is less familiar than it should be. It's the story of Isaac in the wadi of Gerar (Gen. 26:17-22). We're told that Isaac “dug again the wells that his father Abraham had dug and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death.” When, in doing so, Isaac and his servants came upon a well of spring water, the locals quarreled with them, claiming “the water is ours!” So Isaac named that well “Esek,” meaning, “contention,” because he had quarreled with his neighbors over it. Rather than insisting that the well was his—which by right it was, after all, he and his servants went ahead and dug another one. But the locals quarreled with him over that one, too, so he named it “Sitnah,” meaning “hostility,” for it seemed that there was nothing but hostility in the air.

At this point, Isaac could have done several things: he could have fought over that well; he could have gone back and tried to reclaim Esek; he could have left the region altogether. Instead, he moved on a bit further, still within Gerar, and dug yet another well. This time, we're told, they didn't quarrel over it, so he named it “Rehovot,” meaning “wide open spaces,” saying, “Now at last the Lord has granted us wide open spaces to flourish in the land.” (Gen. 26:17-22)

This story is typical. It seems as though so many of the early stories of our settlement in the Land of Israel are stories of conflict. Abraham, you may recall, experienced conflict with Avimelech in Gerar and so too, as we've seen, did Isaac. In the next generation, Jacob had to struggle to maintain good relations with his neighbors (Hamor and Shem; see Gen. 36)—and so on, and so on, and so on.

We who have been born and raised in America are spoiled. We live in a most unusual time and a most unusual place, one of those rare spots on earth where there is—currently, at least—little conflict over the national identity of the land on



which we live and the borders of our nation. That isn't true in large portions of the world today, and it wasn't true here even one hundred and fifty years ago. There were wars—not just conflicts, but wars—with our neighbors to the north, our neighbors to the south and native Americans as well. During the first one hundred years of our nation's history, U.S. territory included vast regions in which there was open warfare with other peoples claiming national rights within it.

We all know how those wars turned out. Some of our place names may still be French Canadian, like "Acadia," or Spanish, like "Los Angeles;" they might be Indian, like "Massachusetts;" but the nationality of this part of the world is now, for better or worse, unquestionably, decidedly American. Not so elsewhere.

The struggles within the land of Israel between Arabs and Jews for national primacy have been a source of tremendous pain and suffering for over a hundred years. It is natural to reflect on this struggle in the wake of the death this week of a man whom many have considered the contemporary embodiment of Palestinian nationalism. It's ironic (and yet characteristic of the nature of the movement he created and maintained) that this man, who devoted his entire life to the struggle for Palestinian Arab supremacy in the Land of Israel, who fought so viciously and ruthlessly against those whom he saw as European immigrants with no right to settle in the land, was himself, almost undoubtedly, Egyptian.

And yet this didn't seem to stop the romantic appeal that this man generated among so many supporters around the world. Through a combination of wily deviousness and brilliant leveraging of his at times meager resources, he did succeed in garnering tremendous support for the cause of Palestinian nationalism.

But at what a cost in pain, in suffering, in blood, and perhaps most ironic of all, at what a cost to the national aspirations of those in whose name he supposedly waged his struggle! Where might Palestinian Arabs be today, had they had the leadership they deserved?

The Israeli-Palestinian struggle is often depicted as symmetrical. It is not. The two sides are profoundly different and it is fallacious to suggest otherwise. Just one example. There has been little gloating in Israel this week. A passage from Proverbs kept coming into my mind during this time: "Binpol oyvicha al tismach"—"Do not rejoice at the fall of your enemy; When he trips, let your heart

not rejoice.” (Proverbs 24) Somehow, the wisdom of that saying has apparently been felt within Israel during these past few days.

Compare that to the rejoicing that takes place in the West Bank or in Gaza following a (quote, unquote) “successful” suicide attack in Israel. One week ago, following the attack in the Tel Aviv market, the mother of the suicide bomber was angry with the men who had recruited her son—who was sixteen at the time. “They should have recruited someone older,” she said. Note that she didn’t condemn the attack—which killed three civilians shopping for fruit—she simply felt that her son was too young to carry it out.

I think back to the lyrics of that Rodgers and Hammerstein song in *South Pacific*, of which I was reminded last week by a member of our congregation:

You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear,
You’ve got to be taught from year to year.
It’s got to be drummed
In your dear little ear,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.
You’ve got to be taught before it’s too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate.
You’ve got to be carefully taught.

Palestinians have been carefully taught by their leaders during the past 100 years. Whether it was the grand Mufti of Jerusalem in the 30s who formed an alliance with Hitler, or the leaders of Hamas who continue to see the destruction of Israel as their ultimate objective, more important even than the attainment of a homeland by their people or the alleviation of suffering on the part of their people—Palestinian

Arab leaders have propagated and taught their followers the most insidious of libels about the Jews.

This is not to say that every Israeli leader has had vision, or that every Israel leader is of unimpeachable integrity, or that all Israeli politicians are free of prejudice. But fortunately, when the many different factions that supported the idea of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel came together in 1948, they agreed upon a system of governance that transcends any one individual leader. It's not perfect, but considering the challenges the nation faced at its inception and has continued to face since then, the system of government in Israel is remarkably democratic, remarkably faithful to the Rule of Law, and remarkably generous in spirit. If you want to feel proud to be a Jew, read the Israeli Declaration of Independence. What an extraordinary document! It extends a hand of peace, explicitly, to Israel's Arab neighbors, who were at the time poised to invade. Not willing to incorporate *esek* or *sitnah*, "contention" or "hostility," into its foundational documents, Israel never adopted them as part of its national persona either. Parties that espouse racist doctrines are banned from Parliament, forbidden to poison the political atmosphere with their venom.

I feel tremendous "rachmonus"—compassion—for the Palestinians. No one with a heart and a soul, no one with eyes that can see, cannot but be appalled by their suffering. Would that their leaders would have helped them establish themselves on the basis of truth, decency and compassion, rather than on the basis of self-delusion, deception and hatred. As disturbing as it may be, I urge people to read the national covenant of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Compare it with the Israeli Declaration of Independence. It has supposedly been amended in the wake of the Oslo Accords, but the amended text is nowhere to be found on the website of the Palestinian National Authority. The English translation of the original text is the one that's prominently displayed. That text, unapologetically and defiantly, is committed to armed struggle to liberate all of Palestine—that is, to destroy the State of Israel—which, however, is nowhere mentioned in the document. Official school textbooks routinely reinforce violence against Jews. Would that Palestinian Arabs had been led to live alongside Jews rather than taught the virtues of killing and maiming them. Israelis who see a Palestinian approaching them must come to grips with the very rational concern that he or she might be a human bomb.

Nonetheless, Israelis do not teach hatred in their schools. They have yet to descend to that level of depravity.

Israel has a right to be proud of that, and yet, sadly, that has not been enough to bring peace to that troubled land. Because no matter how outlandish Palestinian claims might be, however one understands what happened in the past, one fact remains: they live where they live. And, as is the case with all other human beings, they have the right to be unmolested. They have the right to be free. Unless and until they are, Israel cannot fully enjoy her freedom. It is a fantasy to imagine, as Palestinians sometimes do, that the national aspirations of one side in this conflict can be addressed without addressing those of the other. They cannot. So long as Palestinians live under Israeli occupation, the situation is unstable.

When the Jews began to re-settle the land of Israel at the end of the 19th century, they moved into the cities where there had been Jewish communities for centuries, cities like Jerusalem and Tiberias and Hebron, but they also established settlements of their own. One of the earliest of these was a farming village southeast of Tel Aviv, built on land purchased from a Christian Arab landowner. Founded in 1890 by First Aliyah immigrants from Poland, they named it “Rehovot” (“wide open spaces”)—after the well we read about this morning. Originally the site of many citrus groves, vineyards and almond orchards, it then became the home of a scientific research institution later renamed the Weizman Institute.

What a hopeful and promising decision it was to create that village. Even today there are wide open spaces in Israel. Fortunately, there is still the opportunity to disengage, to separate two peoples who have no desire to live together, whose national aspirations are so much in conflict. Unfortunately, with time it becomes increasingly difficult to do so.

The Jewish way, since Isaac, has been, in the face of esek, in the face of “contention,” to move aside, until one is no longer a thorn in the side of one’s neighbor—and vice versa. Israel is responsibly pursuing such a course right now. Israel should be encouraged to continue down that path until both Israel and her neighbors come to feel that they are living in a Rehovot, in a place with “ample space” for each other and between them.

Only when both peoples have a place they can call home, have a place in which they can live and breathe freely, can there be any hope that the walls that separate them might one day no longer be necessary. To get there requires strong, courageous and humane leadership on both sides. Let us hope and pray—for the sake of all of those innocent victims who may still yet fall victim to this bitter conflict—that such leadership arises bimheira b'yameinu, soon, speedily and in our days.

Amen.