

Lech Lecha: Go Forth and What I Told the Prime Minister

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I took the advice of this week's torah portion. Using the opening words as my guide, as my GPS, where Avraham, the very first Jew is told, "Lech Lecha" to leave his homeland to travel to the land of Israel, I set out for Eretz Yisrael. I am reminded of the words of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav who said, "Wherever I am going, I am always going to the Land of Israel." I thought about this week's Torah portion as I prepared to meet the Prime Minister of Israel. I headed a delegation of rabbis who met with Mr. Netanyahu and thought about what I should say to open our meeting.

When Abraham's shepherds fought with the shepherds of his nephew Lot over the choice land for their cattle to graze, Abraham settled the confrontation when he said to Lot, "*Al na tehi meriva beini uvenecha, kee anashim ahim anahnu.* Let there not be an argument, or dispute between us, for we are brothers." In other words, regardless of whatever differences we may have, we are family. And so I opened our meeting with the Prime Minister and rabbis from the United States with those words from this week's parasha.

A number of the people we met expressed thanks to us for coming, especially in these tough times. Education minister Naftali Bennett put it this way, "Thanks for coming, especially now, when things are tough. But after all, you're family. You're supposed to be here." That sense of being family and one people was also expressed by Sallai Meridor. Former ambassador of Israel to the U.S., he has started a new organization to encourage "Israeli Judaism", and we talked about his efforts to find common ground among the Jews of Israel that reflect their lifestyle. Looking for alternatives to the Orthodox monopoly on religion he is seeking to partner with others who are expressing and exploring their Judaism in non-traditional ways.

He told us he carries a keepah in his pocket for two reasons – Not because he is religious. The first reason he explained is so that if anything should ever happen to him, and he falls in the road, they will know he is a Jew. And secondly so that if he ever happens to be someplace and a tenth is needed for a minyan, he can be counted on to join in.

This is what it means to be family.

We had open and frank discussions with several ministers and others and heard concern in a number of quarters about what the Middle East will look like post-Iran deal. There are now 3,000 Iranian soldiers in Syria. Two months ago there were none. We spoke about feelings in Israel and the disappointment that at a time of national consensus, we Jews in America were not united and supportive of their position on the deal with Iran. As Michael Oren put it – there are only two things people in the Knesset agree upon. One is how terrible the food is in the cafeteria, and the other is how bad the agreement with Iran is. We explained that one of the problems was the lack of an alternative to the agreement and expressed our concern that support for Israel must remain bi-partisan and the need for better and closer consultation with the Diaspora community.

With the current wave of knifings going on, I sensed that people were more cautious and vigilant. The streets were a little less full. I noticed that as I was walking on the sidewalk a couple of times, and someone was walking slightly ahead of me, at a similar pace, after a few moments, they would glance

over their shoulders, just to see who it was walking behind them. And I found myself doing so as well. Many people are now carrying a knife or a pistol. And once again, I marvel, considering all the threats all around, at how nonviolent a society Israel is.

The current wave of violence was started by false rumors spread by the PA and others that Israel was going to change the status of the Al Aska Mosque and Temple Mount. Just as in 1929, 1930's, and other times, the same lie was told and truth distorted to manipulate people and demonize Israel. Michael Oren speculated that the knife is being used because it is so close and personal, and also is a symbol associated with the work of the Islamic extremist group, ISIS.

It is bad enough that the attacks on Israelis are motivated by a series of lies, but not surprisingly, the mainstream media contributes to the misinformation. Some of you may have seen or read about the MSNBC reporter who falsely reported that Israeli Defense Forces had shot an innocent terrorist, an unarmed man – only to be corrected by the anchor back in America who pointed out that the very video footage he aired contradicted his report and showed a man wielding a knife.

One of the biggest lies used to stir passions was the statement by Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas that a 13 year old who had attacked a 13 year old Israeli kid on a bike was killed. The lies, along with the incitement coupled with the portrayal of themselves as victims are all familiar tactics used to fuel the fire.

You can say it is Israeli aggression, settlement policy, or the occupation that leads to this frustration, but I find that line of reasoning to be both wrong and naive. A four year old child who says on Palestinian TV that he wants to be an engineer when he grows up so he can make bombs to blow up Jews does not know about settlements or occupation. He is the product of a society which embraces and promulgates virulent anti-Semitic hatred. This is why when Israel insisted on the Palestinians accepting Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people and that they renounce their ongoing campaign to vilify the Jewish state an earlier round of peace talks broke down.

But despite the violent attacks, Minister Bennett said, "Medinat Yisrael – the state of Israel will be ok. The real concern is about am yisrael, the Jewish people." And that was why we went to Israel, to solidify those ties.

Let me conclude with one of those, "only in Israel stories". A cab driver who had just returned from his first (and last) visit to the United States captured the meaning of Israel. After complaining about how expensive America is, and how materialistic American society is, he told me – "If a tree falls in America no one cares. But here in Israel, if a tree falls, I feel it, we all feel it, and are bothered by it." And that is why Avraham set out for the land of Israel. So we would have a place where every tree is precious to us.

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