

## "So This Is Israel." Finding the Promise in the Promised Land

Toldot 2018

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

It's very special to be back with all of you here in this room.

One of our members asked me earlier this week if I would be wearing a morning suit this Shabbat. When I told him – yes, that was my plan, he said he was very surprised. I said why? He said, "I just didn't think you would have brought it back with you from Israel."

Let me tell you how much use I would get out of this outfit in Yad Binyamin. We have more ties in The Jewish Center hat room than in our entire Yishuv. The Hebrew language doesn't even have a word for a morning suit.

To paraphrase Rabbi Lamm, it's great to be away; and it's great to be back.

Rachel and I and our kids live every day with a kind of healthy tension. On the one hand, we love being in Israel and we feel like every moment is a bracha. And at the same time we miss our lives in New York and in particular we miss our lives at The Jewish Center.

When we mapped out this year, we penciled in a couple of Shabbatot on which I would return for a visit. And when I envisioned coming back, I had images of catching up, doing a little learning together and maybe sharing with you a couple stories about Israel.

But I'm afraid that the world has changed too much for that to be possible. There's just no escaping the sense that these are fraught times. And the pace at which these events are unfolding is just alarming. At the very moment we're processing something horrific something equally horrific happens. Surely this moment calls for something a little more somber and a little more serious.

Of course everyone is thinking about safety and security – as they should be. But beyond pragmatics, in the aftermath of Pittsburgh, there are a whole host of topics that should be accorded higher priority on our communal agenda. And I want to open up a couple of them with you this morning.

To get there, the question that I want to think about with you is this: Given all the legitimate and justifiable reasons to be apprehensive about what's been happening in the world recently, how can we find a way to live our lives without fear?

In the book of Bereishit there are three people that Hashem tells, אל תירא – don't be afraid.

The first is Avraham:

After Avraham saves Lot and brokers a deal with the king of Sodom, Hashem tells him:

אל תירא אברהם אנכי מגן לך שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד

Avraham: Don't be afraid. I will protect you and your reward will be great.

The second instance is in our Parsha.

The Torah has just rounded out the narrative of Yitzhak and his various disputes over well water. And Hashem appears to him for the first time. And He says:

אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ אֵל תִּירָא כִּי אִתְּךָ וְיִבְרַכְתִּיךָ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת וְרַעְךָ בְּעַבְדֵי אַבְרָהָם עַבְדִּי  
I'm the God of your father, Abraham. Don't be afraid. For I'm with you, I'll bless you, and I will make your progeny numerous on account of Avraham.

And finally, toward the end of the book, after Yaakov gets wind of the fact that Yosef is still alive, he starts to head from Canaan to Egypt. And Hashem appears to him and says:

אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ אֵל תִּירָא מִרְדֵּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךָ שָׁם  
I'm the God of your forefathers. Don't be afraid to descend into Egypt for I shall make you a great nation there.

And it's actually quite stunning. Here are three of Jewish history's most confident and self-assured individuals. Of course they're still people, but what are they so afraid of that Hashem himself has to intervene and reassure them?

What I'd like to suggest is that the specific context of each of these cases is the key to understanding just what it is that the Torah is telling us. And I'd like to further suggest that these three models represent three types of fear that we face in life.

What was Avraham afraid of? As Rashi writes, having just emerged from the war of the five kings against the four, Avraham was worried about the soldiers he had killed in battle. The man who had etched the ethic of chesed into the consciousness of the Jewish people was forever thinking about how his actions bore an impact on others. He wasn't worried about what was going to happen; he was worried about what had already happened. Today we would call this a pang of guilt. It's a retrospective fear about something that's happened in the past.

What was Yitzhak afraid of? The Ramban writes that he feared for his life. Between Avimelekh and all of the enemies he had made among his Philistine neighbors, he worried that they would kill him. Having survived the akeidah, we can well understand Yitzhak's heightened sensitivity to the hairsbreadth separating life and death. Here was a prospective fear: The fear of one's own demise.

And finally Yaakov. This is the most difficult to understand. When Hashem reassures Avraham, it's toward the beginning of his prophetic career. When Hashem speaks to Yitzhak, he's reached midlife. But by the time Hashem tells Yaakov אֵל תִּירָא, he's reached old age. He's weathered every possible adversity. He survived Esav and Lavan and overcame utter poverty. He suffered the losses of his beloved parents and wife. He endured the anguish of having lost a child. What's left for him to fear?

As Rashi writes,

לפי שהיה מיצר על שנוזקק לצאת לחוצה לארץ

Yaakov's was the fear of *galut*. It was the fear of leaving Israel and heading to a land not his own. And it wasn't just fear; it pained him.

The first two categories are existential: A fear of the past and a fear of the future. We can talk about them or process them. But they're built into the human condition and they're not going away. We all walk around with regrets or worries about life decisions that we've made. And we all walk around with the recognition that there are forces beyond our control and that one day we'll leave this world and meet our maker.

So what's the third category? What's the fear of the diaspora?

The answer is the balance of the story. The answer is all the things that befell the Jewish people when they lived outside the land of Israel. It's the book of Exodus:

- Assimilation and acculturation;
- Exposure to alien and godless cultures;
- Demonization, dehumanization;
- An assault on the values we hold most dear;
- The inability to be the arbiter of your own destiny because you lack the moral or religious freedom to live the life of your choosing.

In a word, Yaakov's fear is the fear of losing one's identity. When I'm home, he says, I know where I am and I know who I am. But how will I and my children and their children retain that identity in a land that's not our own?

For 2000 years Jews the world over woke up every morning and asked themselves that same question. And for 2000 years they defied unimaginable odds – doing what no nation had ever done before. They survived and thrived in exile and retained their Jewish identity with no land to call home. They did it because they had no choice. But where does that leave the Jews of the diaspora in a post-1948 world? What about everything Yaakov was afraid of?

I can tell you that I am not among the pessimists. One bad actor – or a thousand bad actors – can't change American's unswerving commitment to religious freedom. What a privilege and what a blessing to live in such a country. Of course the Jewish community comes together at moments like this; but look at the way the American community has come together. Citizens of this country recognize intuitively that an attack on a shul is an attack on America's very ethos.

But it's also moments like these when we American Jews have to confront our darkest fears and ask ourselves the questions we're not usually willing to ask. Not because we're afraid of anti-Semitism, but because anti-Semitism is the great reminder that Jews will always be different – because we have a different responsibility in this world.

If the question is how we live with the fears and anxieties of life in the diaspora, there are two ready answers.

I would say that one is the long game and one is more immediate.

As we talked about this past year, The Jewish Center has always played a pivotal role on issues pertaining to Zionism – whether in supporting the founding of the Jewish State or in supporting it since 1948. And it's always been a great source of pride for us that so many of our members, and so many of the children and grandchildren of our members, have moved to Israel.

I guess part of the risk incurred by the shul when it sends the rabbi to Israel for the year is that he may come back and talk about Israel....

The long game is to re-insert Aliyah into our communal discourse:

- To accord honor to those who have moved to Israel;
- To teach our kids in school, in shul and at home that when we sing the words of Hatikvah, they're not just words to a song; they capture the essence of our dreams;
- Part of the long game is to map out a life path where at least one of the roads leads to Yerushalayim. Let's at least leave open the possibility that one day it could happen to us.

In thinking about the difference between life in the diaspora and life in Israel, I'm reminded of the conversation between Morpheus and Neo in the sci-fi classic, *The Matrix*. Trying to come to grips with his own potential, Neo asks: "What are you trying to tell me? That I can dodge bullets?"

To which Morpheus responds: "No, Neo. I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready, you won't have to."

Yes, Israel has its own dangers as we know all-too well. But being there and being here are not the same.

- It's the difference between being objects and being subjects.
- It's the difference between being a minority and being a majority.
- It's the difference between hoping for a better tomorrow on the one hand and being the shaper of tomorrow on the other.

But most of us are not picking up and making Aliyah any time in the immediate future. So there's a second answer as to how to combat our fears and anxieties starting today.

And it's the answer that's best captured in our parsha in Hashem's words to Yitzhak. אִתְּךָ אֲנֹכִי – I will be with you. Part of any fear is the fear of confronting the threat alone. And so Hashem says, "You will never be alone." That's already been our community's reaction – the vigils and the gatherings – the displays of solidarity and the outpouring of support. But these are the sentiments that have to continue long after the events of two weeks ago begin to fade into the background.

It's the feeling of being part of a close-knit family such that whatever happens, we're never alone.

My neighbor, Marc, told me the following story. He said when he moved to Yad Binyamin around 10 years ago, a man from the community passed away and his children who were in the

twenties at the time were all saying kaddish. But he noticed that one of the siblings stopped saying Kaddish after only 30 days while everyone else went on saying Kaddish for 11 months. So Marc asked him why. The man said I'll tell you. "You see, I said Kaddish for my parents many years ago. They were killed in a car crash when I was a little boy. I'm one of five children. At the time that my parents were killed, the agency in charge of family services didn't have anyone with the capacity to adopt five orphans. So the shul in Yad Binyamin said we'll adopt them so they can all stay together. Thanks to the chesed of five families here in Yad Binyamin, my four siblings and I all grew up together. So of course I wanted to honor my adoptive father by saying Kaddish for him."

Such is the power of a Jewish community.

Such is the power of a Jewish state that functions like a Jewish family.

Such, my friends, is the promise of the Promised Land: It's the feeling of confidence that comes from knowing that you are never alone because you're always among family.

If we're not going to pick up and move to Israel, then at least we have to do our best to keep her promise at the forefront of our consciousness. It's up to us to remember just how small our Jewish family is; just how much we all need one another; and just how much we can contribute to the Jewish people.

אָנְכִי, אֶרֶד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִם, וְאָנְכִי, אֶעֱלֶךָ גַּם-עִלָּה

Hashem doesn't just promise to Yaakov that that galut will be temporary. As the Seforno intimates, Hashem promises too that the time we spend outside the land of Israel will raise us to heights we could never have achieved if we never left.

We can't control the forces that create fear in our world. But where we live, how we live and how we react is up to us.