

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to begin by thanking the sponsors of today's drasha:

- Jim and Stefanie Olson “in memory of, and on the occasion of the second yahrtzeit of, Yiddis Bultcha bat Abba Menachem (Joyce Feinberg), Yehudah ben Yechezkel (Jerry Rabinowitz), Dovid ben Eliezer (David Rosenthal), Chaim ben Eliezer (Cecil Rosenthal), Yitzchok Chaim ben Menachem (Irving Younger), Daniel Avrom ben Baruch (Dan Stein), Raizel bas Avrohom (Rose Mallinger), Yosef ben Hyman (Richard Gottfried), Beila Rochel bas Moshe (Bernice Simon), Zalman Shachna ben Menachem Mendel (Sylvan Simon), and Moshe Gadol ben Yosef (Mel Wax), who were murdered in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on Shabbat Kodesh Parshat Vayera, 18 Cheshvan 5779.”
- Mark and Elsa Lustman in memory of Elsa's father, Morris Cantor, whose yahrtzeit is 24 Cheshvan (November 11).

Thank you all for your generous support of the Shul. May all the *neshamos* have an *aliya*, and may you be rewarded with much *bracha v'hatzlacha* and good health.

Today, is the second anniversary of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the deadliest attack on Jews in American history. It left eleven people dead and six wounded. This painful reminder of our state of *galus*, even in this wonderful *medina shel chessed*, was jarring and upsetting.

ה' יקום דמם

We are also sitting here today, in an unprecedented time, after an unprecedented election, with an unprecedented lack of clarity about our state of affairs... in so many areas.

And during this election season, many of us have felt discouraged, further dispirited by a media that is stoking so much fear on both sides. We feel like we have lost control; of our lives, and of our future.

With a pandemic going on, which we are still struggling to manage, we are beset by a pervasive sense of helplessness.

There is so much uncertainty. And on the spiritual side, we are living in a time of pervasive immorality and a blatant disregard for ethics in our society, and we seem to be able to do very little to stem the tide.

As much as we would like to believe that we have built a safe space, a cocoon within which to raise our children, our own community is not immune to attrition and assimilation. We know of too many of our youth who feel disenfranchised and disinterested, despite all the education they receive.

We look to the Middle East, and we know in our hearts that peace is still a distant dream. The possibility of a nuclear armed Iran and the threat it poses to the existence of Israel, is constantly on our mind. Despite some encouraging breakthroughs in the region, the Palestinian issue is nowhere close to a resolution.

Personally, too, each of us is experiencing a sense of vulnerability, helplessness, and despair. Simply put--we feel like we need a miracle.

So what are we to do at a time like this? How should we direct our thoughts?

First and foremost, we must realize that each human being has a mission to perfect the world. We must always do whatever we can, in every situation, to restore a sense of normalcy and order, and to right the wrongs that we identify around us. We must always do what we can to alleviate pain and suffering. We must never sit back and simply accept things.

In *Shivchei HaBesht* the following enlightening story is recorded. One time the Czar's soldiers were being forcefully placed in Jewish homes. The Baal Shem Tov, disturbed by this decree, turned to his disciple, Rav Nachman of Horedenka, and said that they should pray that this be stopped. Rav Nachman, who always said *gam zu letova*, reacted in his usual way and again uttered these words. The Baal Shem Tov told him, "How fortunate it is that you were not around in the time of Haman; for if you were, you would have also said, *gam zu letova!*"

The lesson for us is that, no matter what, we must always try—we must do whatever we can, while accepting that ultimately, some things are beyond our control. That when we have done what we can, if it does not go our way, we are to trust that Hashem has His plan and we were not meant to change it. At that point, after we put in our effort, we must say *gam zu letova*.

The great Avraham Avinu, as we read in today's *kriah*, listened obediently when Hashem told him to sacrifice his son Yitzchak.

בראשית פרשת וירא פרק כב פסוק ב,ג

(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֶּתְּ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמִּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶתֶד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים: (ג) וַיִּשְׁפֹּם אַבְרָהָם בְּבִקְרָו וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת-חַמְלֵוֹ וַיִּלְטַח אֶת-שָׁגֵי נַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּגֹו וַיִּבְקַע עֶצֶי עֹלָה וַיִּקַּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר-לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

On the surface, it seems like there was complete nullification of self—no questioning—no struggle; accepting it as *bashert*. Some even suggest that Avraham went happily to slaughter his dear son—because it was the will of Hashem.

But there is a line in *Slichos* that seems inconsistent with this submissive and unquestioning attitude of Avraham Avinu בהר המוריה עננו כשענית לאברהם אבינו

Answer us, just as you answered Avraham Avinu on Har HaMoria

של"ה פרשת וירא תורה אור

אמנם כי דייקת שפיר תמצא בפסוק ובדברי רבותינו ז"ל (בראשית רבה פנ"ו ס"ד) שהיו אב ובנו מצדדים ליפטר ממיטה זו, אם בפסוק כתיב (בראשית כב, ה) 'ויאמר אברהם אלהים יראה לו השה', וזו היה תפלה ממנו שימציא השם יתברך שה במקומו, וסיים אחר כך ואם לא ימציא לו השם יתברך שה אזי 'לעלה בני' (שם), מכל מקום התפלל הוא שיעשה לו השם יתברך נס, ושעל זה אנו אומרים (סליחות) 'מי שענה לאברהם אבינו בהר המוריה הוא יעננו', כי הוא נענה על תפלתו...

The **Shel"ha** writes that, even while accepting the difficult commandment, he still davened for Hashem to intervene. Once God commanded it, he was firmly committed to obeying, but until the final moments he never accepted its finality--not without asking Hashem to change his mind. His *tefilla* was expressed in the words *אלקים יראה לו השה*, Hashem should show me the ram to slaughter—please let it not be my son...

This is similar to what Avraham expressed when he heard what was in store for Sodom. He protested. He argued with Hashem. He did not just sit back and accept it.

בראשית פרשת וירא פרק יח פסוק כג - כה

(כג) וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲעָף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע:

(כד) אוֹלַי יֵשׁ חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָעָף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמָקוֹם לְמַעַן חַמְשִׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּה:

(כה) חֲלִלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂתוֹ בְּדָבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כַצְדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כְּלִי-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

There is never a situation where man must remain helpless; where he cannot do something—exert some effort. It is our sacred responsibility to live in this world—making the best judgements and decisions we can make, and putting in appropriate effort to bring our plans to fruition.

We are required to do our best to control our lives, to control our destiny—to advocate for the candidates and policy issues close to our hearts. We are required to do whatever we can to protect ourselves and our shuls. We must do what we can to provide for our families; to live in this world—with *hishtadlus*—putting in our maximum effort.

In this election, it was our sacred responsibility to vote. To make sure we are heard, that we are part of this democratic process. To ensure that we participate in actively shaping our future to the best of our ability.

But, ultimately, when man has done what he can, he must learn to accept that Hashem controls the world. Not to accept this fact begrudgingly, but with real confidence. There is something reassuring knowing that Hashem is in control. It is called *bitachon*.

As the *Chovos Halevavos* explains

חובות הלבבות פ"א

מהו מהות הביטחון? הוי אומר מנוחת נפשו של הבוטח וסמיכת ליבו על זה שהוא בוטח בו שיפעל בענין שהוא בוטח עליו באופן שטוב ויאה לו כפי דעתו של מי שבוטח בו מה יאה לאדם.

There is a tranquility knowing that God, who has a better understanding of what is good, is in charge.

And if our candidate of choice does not get in—we must feel confident—and believe that it doesn't change anything—because we have the Ribbono Shel Olam, who is really in control. And nothing has changed between yesterday and today. Yesterday, Hashem ran the world, and today Hashem runs the world. Not President Trump nor former Vice President Biden. Not Republicans nor Democrats.

חזון איש "אמונה ובטחון"

טעות נושנה נתאזרחה בלב רבים במושג ביטחון: שם בטחון המשמש למידה מהוללה ועיקרית בפי החסידים, נסתובבה במושג חובה להאמין בכל מקרה שפוגש האדם והעמידתו לקראת עתיד בלתי מוכרע, ושני דרכים בעתיד, אחת טובה ולא שניה-כי בטח יהיה הטוב, ואם מסתפק וחושש על היפוך הטוב הוא מחוסר ביטחון. ואין הוראה זו בביטחון נכונה, שכל שלא נתברר בנבואה גורל העתיד, אין העתיד מוכרע כי מי יודע משפטי ה' וגמולותיו יתברך? אבל, ענין הביטחון הוא שאין מקרה בעולם, וכל הנעשה תחת השמש, הכל בהכרזה מעתו יתברך.

There is a common misconception that *bitachon* means to believe that if one has confidence in G-d, He will grant all the person's requests. Contrary to this, the **Chazon Ish** writes in his book, *Emunah U'Bitachon* (Faith and Confidence, ch. 2), that this kind of belief is fundamentally wrong. In his words “*Who knows G-d's considerations? Rather, the concept of bitachon is the belief that events do not occur randomly and that everything that happens in the world is ordained by G-d, whether good or otherwise ... This belief is the trait of bitachon.*”

And our current predicament, the pandemic which has taken hold of the world, should lead us to a humbling awareness, which is not altogether bad. It supplies a much needed corrective attitude to the arrogance of secular man, who has always imagined that given enough education, enough money, and enough will, any problem can be solved. Man who thinks he can somehow permanently defeat disease, death, and hatred among men. Man who thinks that he can insulate his children in a way that keeps them all permanently in the fold.

Indeed, this shocking awareness of our limitations and our helplessness is part of the spirit that religion seeks to instill in us; to remind us that Hashem is in control.

On Rosh Hashana, when we recognize Hashem as King, we say in our tefillos:

יודע כל פעול כי אתה פעלתו ויבין כל יצור כי אתה יצרתו

May every existing being (every object) know that you have made it (and sustain it); may every creature realize that you have created it.

Spirituality consists of the acknowledgment that we are *pa'ul*, not only *po'el*; that we are the objects of events, and not always the subjects who determine them; that to a large extent we are the pawns and not the players in the game of life. It provides an awareness of our severe limitations in the face of God and the world. That we are limited in what we can do, sometimes tragically so.

And specifically, when it comes to governments, Shlomo Hamelech taught in *Mishlei* (21:1)

משלי פרק כא פסוק א: פְּלִגֵּי־מַיִם לְבַמֶּלֶךְ בְּיַד־יְהוָה עַל־קֶלֶאֱשֶׁר יַחְפֹּץ יִטְוּנוּ:

Like channeled water is the mind of the king in Hashem's Hand; He directs it to whatever He wishes.

The **Malbim** explains that regular people have full *bechira*, free choice, but when it comes to kings and rulers, who control the lives of the general population and have the potential to adversely affect the masses, **Hashem directly controls their decisions**. This should give us a sense of security.

מלבי"ם משלי פרק כא פסוק א

(א) פלגי מים לב מלך, הגם שלב האדם הפרטי נתון ברשותו והבחירה בידו, לא כן לב המלך, אחר שבבחירתו תלוי אושר הכלל, ואם יבחר בדרך רע ישחית רבים ועצומים, לכן לבו זה הכללי הוא ביד ה', והוא בעניני הכלל משולל הבחירה,

During this difficult time, as Jews, it is crucial that we find the balance between effort and faith. We have no right to give up control from the outset. One who acknowledges his helplessness has made himself helpless. One who prematurely hides behind the slogan of *gam zu letovah* has written his own prescription for failure. The student who begins with the attitude that he has no control over his academic achievement will fail in his courses. A couple who take a detached view of their marriage, wondering whimsically whether they will be unhappy or miserable, and making no effort to control their future, are slated for unhappiness. The entrepreneur who forfeits all initiative because things are not under his control has already declared his bankruptcy. A citizen who does not advocate for himself, and ignores the democratic process, has given up his rights. Similarly, a Jew who thinks that spirituality is not something that he has to work for, will never achieve *dveikus ba'Hashem*.

But what is the truth: are we in control or are we not? Can we do anything about our lives or is that only an illusion? Are we driving or are we being driven? Are we steering or are we drifting? Are we controlling or are we carried along?

Judaism recognizes that both are true. Man is strong and he is weak. Much of his life is beyond his control — but not all. Clearly, we are not fully in control of life and of events. And it is comforting to know that ultimate control is in the Hands of Hashem who is All knowing, and All merciful. But Judaism declares it an irresponsible fiction to maintain that we have no control whatsoever. A margin of freedom is available to each of us, even if much of life is determined. What we do with that margin of freedom, how we act with that slice of life that we can control — on that we are judged. In that area where we have a choice, where we can exercise discretion and judgment and control and responsibility, that is where our humanity is tested, where our dignity as people and our responsibility as Jews stand trial.

And a foundation of our belief is that there is nothing shameful about trying and failing. But there is everything disgraceful about failing to try. That is the legacy of Avraham Avinu—no matter what, he was never afraid to try. He would not accept the idolatry of his youth. He would not accept the imminent destruction of Sodom. He would not accept that his son needed to be slaughtered. Even as his own sharp sword dangled at the neck of his beloved son, he prayed for mercy. But at the same time, he also was willing to accept Hashem's decisions and His control.

May we learn from the lesson of Avraham Avinu, and during these difficult times, do what we can to control our lives and our destiny, while also turning to Hashem and putting our faith in Him, like never before. Let us try to feel His presence and embrace during these difficult times, and daven for the day when His presence will be easily felt, with the return of the Beis Hamikdash, *bimhera viyamenu, amen*.