

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to thank the *drasha* sponsors:

- Mervyn and Adele Myers, in memory of Mervyn's father, Avraham Eliyahu ben David Moshe, z'l, whose *yahrtzeit* on 16 Cheshvan, and in memory of Adele's mother, Pesya bas Yoel, a'h, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 27 Cheshvan. May their *neshamos* have an *aliya*.
- Jim and Stefanie Olson, “in memory of and on the occasion of the third *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 Kodosh Parshat Vayera, 18 Cheshvan 5779.” *Hashem yikom damam*.
- George and Brenda Strum, in memory of Brenda's father, Emanuel Reich, z'l, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 13 Cheshvan, and in memory of Brenda's mother, Esther Reich, a'h, whose *yahrtzeit* is on 22 Cheshvan. May their *neshamos* have an *aliya*.
- Yosef and Devorah Wolf, in memory of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, whose first *yahrtzeit* is the 20th of Cheshvan. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

The massacre in Pittsburgh three years ago is a painful part of the long history of anti-Semitism that began millenia ago. It is hard to believe that Pittsburgh has joined the list of places that have become a permanent part of our people's history. Eleven Jews were murdered for no other reason than being Jewish. When the shooter shouted “*All Jews must die*” as he stormed into the Tree of Life Synagogue, he was using language we have heard before; the language of Muslim Jihadists, of the Nazis before them, of the Cossacks before them, and of the Chmielnicki pogromists before them, of the Spanish Inquisitors before them, and of the Crusaders before them, and of the Romans and Babylonians before them. He was tapping into a strain of hatred against our people that goes back thousands of years—to Esav's hatred of Yaakov Avinu, and to the evil perpetuated by Amalek. What happened in Pittsburgh was a product of the anti-Semitism that has been part of the Jewish story since its inception.

We are, unfortunately, reminded of this by the fact that this week was also the Hebrew anniversary of **Kristallnacht**, when on 15 Cheshvan in 1938, the Nazis coordinated vicious pogroms against the Jewish community of Germany. Encouraged by their leaders, rioters attacked and beat Jewish residents, burned and destroyed 267 shuls, vandalized 7,500 Jewish businesses, and ransacked countless Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes, while police and firefighters stood by. 91 Jews were killed and 20,000 others were deported to concentration camps. These pogroms, which collectively came to be known as Kristallnacht (“night of broken glass,” referring to the thousands of windows that were broken) were a turning point, after which Nazi anti-Jewish policy intensified and expanded—and would end 6 years later with 6 million Jews dead.

Two years ago, a man wielding a machete walked into a Beis Medrash in Monsey, New York, and stabbed five people as they were lighting Chanuka candles. **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**, whose *yahrtzeit* we will observe this coming week, wrote an article addressing the incident.

“the last two festivals to be added to the Jewish calendar prior to modern times-- Purim and Chanuka — are both about anti-Semitism. There is one obvious difference between them: Haman, of the Purim story, wanted to kill Jews. Antiochus, of the Chanuka story, wanted to kill Judaism. It was the difference between Nazi Germany and Soviet Communism. But there is another difference that has renewed salience after the horrifying knife attack in Monsey, NY. What saved Jews on Purim was behind-the-scenes influence: Esther's influence in the royal court. But the danger of anti-Semitism remained. What if hatred returned and this time there was no Esther around to save the Jews? That is one reason, according to the Talmud, why we do not say Hallel on

*Purim. On Chanuka, by contrast, Jews fought back and won. The Maccabees became a symbol of Jewish activism, of refusing to live in fear. As a symbol of this, the original custom was to light Hanukkah lights outside the front door of the house, or at least in a window facing the street, to publicize the miracle. Today, we see the lighting of giant menorahs in the most prominent public face of cities throughout the world. **Chanuka tells us not to curse the darkness, but instead to bring light to the world. It tells us to fight back and not to be afraid.** ...we must never forget the message of Chanuka: Fight back. Never be afraid. Whatever the threats, be proud to be Jewish and share this pride with others. At times our history has been written in tears, yet we have outlived every empire and every civilization that sought to destroy us. Our spirit, symbolized by the Chanuka candles, is indomitable. Where others spread darkness, let us bring light.*

But what does it mean to spread light? How do we spread light? **Rabbi Sacks** wrote an ethical will to his children about a decade ago, called *Letters to the Next Generation*. In it he explains:
*There's an ancient Midrash – a rabbinical commentary dating back some fifteen centuries. It is asking the question, what made Avraham begin his religious quest? The answer it gives is very strange indeed. It says that he was like a man on a journey in some remote place when he sees in the distance a palace in flames. He asks, Can the palace be without an owner? While he is puzzling about this, he hears a voice coming from the burning building saying, "I am the owner of the palace." So Avraham heard God saying, "I am the owner of the world." This is a haunting story. Let's figure out what it means. Avraham is saying, the palace must have an owner. Someone designed this building, and had it built. Palaces don't suddenly appear of their own accord. And the owner, or at least someone working for him, must be there now, because you don't abandon a palace or leave it unattended. In which case, why is it burning? Somebody should be putting out the flames. **I have never heard a more profound and unsettling account of the nature of the universe. We believe that it is like a palace. Someone designed it. Someone built it. Someone therefore owns it. As I wrote before, the more we understand of how finely tuned the universe is for the emergence of stars, planets and life, the less likely it is that it simply appeared by spontaneous self-generation. Someone made the universe that gave rise to us. In which case, why is there so much evil and suffering and injustice and cruelty and violence and terror and disease and needless death? The universe is a contradiction. On the one hand, order, on the other, chaos. On the one hand, the palace, on the other, the flames. Avraham lived, and we live, with that contradiction. And as the Midrash indicates, there is only one way out. God is calling us, as He called Avraham: "Help Me put out the flames."***

But how do we put out the flames? How do we mend the world? How do we spread light?

Our mission as the Jewish people is to bring Hashem's sense of morality to the world...not just to Jews but to everyone.

The symbol of irrational hatred, pure evil, and anti-Semitism in the Torah is Amalek. The **Malbim** explains that there are "generally accepted" reasons to fight others. Amalek's attack on the Jewish people had none of the "accepted" reasons. It was simply an expression of pure evil. But the Torah adds a perplexing line in describing Amalek...ולא ירא אלקים. *They did not fear God.* They attacked the weak and vulnerable, for no reason. Would we expect Amalek to fear God? What is the Torah teaching us?

In the Parsha we read today, Avraham Avinu tricks Avimelech, as he had done with Paraoth in Mitzrayim, telling him that Sarah was his sister. Avimelech is reproached in a dream for taking Sarah as a wife, and he confronts Avraham about his deceit. He says לממה עשית את הדבר הזה? Why did you do this? To this question, Avraham answered: כי אמרתי רק אין יראת אלקים במקום הזה, *because I said that there is no fear of God in this place.* What is the meaning of this exchange between them?

The **Malbim** explains:

מלבי"ם בראשית (פרשת וירא) פרק כ פסוק יא: ויאמר אברהם כי אמרתי רק אין יראת אלהים במקום הזה, הודיע לו שגם אם נראה איש או עם ש הוא פילוסוף גדול וחכם לו נמוסים ישרים, והרגיל א"ע במדות טובות ע"פ עצת שכלו, והוא עושה משפט וצדקה הכל עפ"י עצת

שכלו, בכ"ז לא נוכל לבטוח על האיש ההוא או העם ההוא, שבעת תסיתהו תאווה לעשות רע שתמיד יגבר שכלו על תאוותו, כי בהפך עת תבער בו אש תאוותו אל אשת חן או הון רעהו באין רואה, אז גם שכלו ילך שולל לרצוה ולנאוף ולעשות כל רע, רק כה אחד נמצא בנפש האדם אשר בו נוכל לבטוח שלא נחטא, והיא מדת היראה השתולה בנפש, עד שממנה יסתעף סעיף אחד שהיא יראת אלהים, עת תמלא הנפש מיראת אלהים המשקיף על נגלהו ונסתריו והצופה אל כל מעשיו, אז גם עת יגבר עליו יצרו יירא ויבוש מהמלך הגדול הרואה את כל מעשיו ויזהר מעשות רע, וכמ"ש יראת ה' מוסר חכמה,

He [Avraham] informed him [Avimelech] that even if an individual or a nation is well versed in philosophy and creates moral codes, and behaves with good character based on their understanding, and acts with justice and practices charity, one still cannot rely on that individual or nation, because when temptation gets too great, his morality will succumb to temptation...without fear of God, even murder is possible...without fear of God, everything becomes possible.

Similarly, the **Netziv** writes:

העמק דבר (שם) והרגוני על דבר אשתי. דמי שאין בו יראת אלהים אינו יכול להתגבר על יצרו המכריע את דעת האדם, ולכן יראתי פן יהרגוני,

One who has no fear of God cannot be expected to conquer his evil inclination that sways man's intellect, and thus I was afraid that they would kill me...

Avimelech was saying to Avraham, I can understand your deceit with regard to the Egyptians, because they are a dreadfully immoral people, and therefore you had to do what you did. However, we are a moral, good, and ethical people. Why did you feel it necessary to ensnare us with this ruse? Avraham was answering: It is true that you are a good and moral people. However, if there is no *yiras Elokim*, no fear of God, then I cannot trust that you will remain decent, for your ethics may well prove unreliable in the face of overwhelming passion and temptation. If there is no religion, if there is no faith in a God above, if morality is not a set of objective facts, and if human beings are not accountable to someone for their actions, what is to prevent people from making up their own laws and moral code as they go along, simply to fit the situation? In such a case, what was considered a reprehensible evil yesterday will become tolerable today and an accepted way of acting tomorrow. This is called moral relativism. Where there is no *יראת אלקים* fear of God, goodness may be present, but it is unreliable.

That is why with everything Avraham had done in his life—his acts of Emunah and his great chesed--the final test of the *akeida*, that we read about this morning, was a test of his *yiras Elokim*. Is Avraham willing to let God alone define morality and right and wrong. Is he willing to follow Hashem, even when it was against what he thought in his mind and felt in his heart? He passed the test when he was willing to let God decide right and wrong, and he is told עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה now I see you fear Hashem.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, the Meshech Chochma, made a profound observation about all *mitzvos*.

משך חכמה ויקרא (פרשת אמור) פרק כג פסוק כב: ובקצרכם וכו' אני ה' אלקיכם. ..כי תדעון כי מתן תורה בעצרת לא היה רק על החוקים, כי אם על הנימוסים המושכלים, כמו חנינה לעני ולגר, כי בלא אמונה בה', עלול שכל האדם להיות כפריץ חיות, לא יחמול ולא ישא פני אביו. לכן (תהלים קלח, ד) "יודוך ה' כל מלכי ארץ כי שמעו אמרי פיך" - כבוד אב, שגם על זה צריך האמונה בה' והמצוה מפיו, כי בלא אמונה - "דור אביו יקלל (ואת אמו לא יברך)" (משלי ל, יא). לכן אמר, כי בהג העצרת תחוגו על מתן תורה, לא על חוקים לבד, כי אם גם על המושגים בשכל. לכן "ובקצרכם את קציר ארצכם וכו'", גם כן מצד ש"אני ה' א - להיכם".

He points out that, in the Torah, we notice the recurrence of the phrase "I am Hashem." He points out that this phrase is surprisingly often used to conclude an ethical commandment, a *mitzvah* which is perfectly rational and understandable. We read, "אני ה'... when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corner of your field. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger; I am the Lord your God." We read "love your neighbor as yourself I am Hashem." We would expect ritual laws, for which no reason is apparent, to conclude in this way. But, with respect to rational laws, is this phrase not superfluous? Wouldn't regular human beings appreciate the need for these kinds of laws, even without the authority of religion, without the reminder that they are commanded by God?

The Meshech Chochma explains that rational people can devise laws that are ethical and by which society can survive. Even without religion, society can conclude that it is good to give charity, to love your neighbor, and not to steal or murder. But, nevertheless, there is a vast difference between a commitment to a law and a principle because you thought of it by yourself and your heart tells you to do it and your conscience affirms it, as opposed to doing it because of a deep and abiding faith in the Creator of the world, who declares this way of life to be preferable to any other. There is no comparison between a person who is good because he is, by nature, soft-hearted or because that is the way his parents brought him up, and one who is good because he has staked his life on the words *Ani Hashem*, because, from the deepest recesses of his soul, he is committed to the Torah and to the revelation of God's will. ה' אֵל is a stamen demanding a level of commitment and obligation, and accountability to a Higher Authority.

In 1936 **Rav Elchanan Wasserman HY”d**, Rosh Yeshiva of Baranowich, visited Berlin. His friend, Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, the head of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, asked him to speak to the students there. It was Parshas Vayera and Rav Elchanan asked about the peculiar language Avraham used when expressing a lack of *yiras Hashem* among the inhabitants of Gerar. רק אין, why would it not have been enough simply to say אין יראת אלקים במקום הזה? Rav Elchanan said Avraham was expressing the fact that the inhabitants of Gerar had everything else--culture, technology, advancement in the sciences and arts. רק only one thing was missing--but that meant everything was missing--*yiras Elokim*. Without *yiras Elokim*, a system of morality that derives from God, a society can easily descend into a lawless and murderous culture.

If we asked most people if murder is wrong, I believe nearly everyone would answer yes. But if we posed a different question: How do you know? And why is it important not to murder? Answers would not be as straightforward. The **Malbim** is teaching us that without submitting to the will of God, without יראת אלקים -- there are no moral facts and there is no accountability. In a secular world, there can only be opinions about morality. They may be personal opinions or society's opinion. But they are still only opinions. And opinions can change quite easily, as history has shown us.

What are called Judeo-Christian values are the gift the Jewish people presented to the world, the light we have offered; our attempt to put out the flames that consume the palace. These values are predicated on the existence of a God of morality. The entire Western world – what we call Western Civilization – is based on this understanding. Without God, we therefore end up with what is known as moral relativism – meaning that morality is not absolute, but only relative to the individual or to the society. Without God, the words “good” and “evil” are just another way of saying “I like” and “I don't like.” If there is no God, the statement “Murder is evil” is the same as the statement “I don't like murder.” That is what Avraham was telling Avimelech. Today, the rejection of Judeo-Christian values and moral absolutes has led to a world of moral confusion, and a world with much hatred and violence. Because without a God Who is the source of morality, morality and ethics, right and wrong, is just a matter of opinion. That is what Hitler meant when he said “Conscience is a Jewish invention.” Therefore, if we want a good world, a world with less evil, less hate, and less anti-Semitism, we, as the Jewish people, must show the world what it means to subscribe to a system of ethics and morals that comes from God. We must model our commitment to this code of ethics and belief system

In his final speech to the Jewish people, the great Moshe Rabbeinu said, “What does Hashem want, just *yiras Elokim*. מה ה' אלקיך שאל מעמד כי אם ליראה. It was the same message that Avraham Avinu had taught Avimelech years earlier. What does God want?—just *yiras Hashem*...this is central to everything. It was the lesson of last of Avraham Avinu's ten tests, and *yiras Hashem* must be the foundation of our lives, so we can model it for the world. May we do our part in spreading light—in spreading Godliness to the world. And may we soon see an end to the evil of anti-Semitism, and a world where all will recognize the Glory of Hashem, ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד...amen.