

Loving, But Not Liking

Lech Lecha 5784¹

This Shabbos, every Rabbi in the country is going to speak about one of two things:

1. According to the Medrash, Avraham was born in the year 1948 from creation, and discovered God in the year 2023- at the age of 75.
2. They will speak about the Torah's first recorded hostage rescue mission- the story of Lot being taken captive in the war between the four kings and the five.

How does one conduct a rescue mission? The Torah doesn't have a recipe for hostage rescue; essentially, Avram paid a handsome ransom and struck a deal with the king of Sodom. He didn't exactly have a detailed plan for rescuing anyone- except maybe himself. In fact, it seems that he knowingly put himself and his wife Sarai into a potential hostage situation, and for that he did have a plan. Recognizing that the Egyptians could potentially kill Avram in order to take his wife, he asked Sarai to say that she was his sister. Being siblings would spare his life, even as it would compromise her virtue.

¹ Inspired, in part, by a Facebook post from Boaz Levi, as shared by Prof. Chaim Saiman: <https://www.facebook.com/chaim.saiman/posts/pfbid02JQnNV4mYjyxQeLgA89fGpy5CuxUjZYYq7n8KeCKXAcINVWYeg4bjPS2U2fHjHv37l>

I ask you: In times like these, we turn to the Torah for solace, and we study the Torah as it gives us energy and optimism. Chizzuk Through Chumash, if you will. We have enough theological problems right now without encountering biblical accounts of seemingly misogynistic actions of our forefathers, who are portrayed as engaging in human trafficking. Our tradition encourages us to give the benefit of the doubt to our forefathers, even as many commentators don't shy away from implicating them in their actions on occasion. Indeed, the Ramban takes Avram to task for this reckless behavior. This morning, however, I want to share with you a Chassidic explanation, from Rav Yaakov Leiner of Izhbitz (Izbica), in his work *Beis Yaakov*. The Izhbitzer points out that there are two kinds of love; there is romantic and passionate love, as is hopefully found between a husband and wife. There is also familial love, as is found among siblings. When a couple encounters a rough patch, passionate love- or the memory of it- may sustain them and carry them through to better times, or it may not be enough. In times of difficulty, the enduring love is familial love, the kind you can't choose, the kind you are born with. People who are bonded by familial love may not actually *like* each other; perhaps it is better for each of them to be apart from one another, but no matter what happens, they are bonded together in irrevocable ways. Avram told Sarai that, since they were about to descend into Egypt, they would be experiencing a time of *hester panim*, of divine concealment. The love between God and them would not always be evident, and they might not be able to sustain that kind of love in return. The key to

endurance, Avram said, is אמרי נא אחותי את - say you are my sister, my family, and that our bond- between the two of us, and between us and God- is irrevocable.

This kind of relationship of brotherhood is not just about putting your arms around someone while singing *Acheinu*, as nice as that is. It's about reassessing what real friendship is, and who our friends really are. The events of Shemini Atzeret have provided us with an opportunity to reassess everything we thought we knew about so many people, and situations. People on the left, who supported progressive causes and protested the Occupation, are now finding out that while their views haven't changed, the movement that was their political and ideological home has. As Gal Beckerman wrote in *The Atlantic*,

The people on "my side" are supposed to care about human suffering, whether it's in the detention camps of Xinjiang or in Darfur. They are supposed to recognize the common humanity of people in need, that a child in distress is first a child in distress regardless of country or background. But I quickly saw that many of those on the left who I thought shared these values with me could see what had happened only through established categories of colonized and colonizer, evil Israeli and righteous Palestinian—templates made of concrete. The break was caused by this enormous disconnect. I was in a world of Jewish suffering that they couldn't see because Jewish suffering simply didn't fit anywhere for them.²

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/left-jewish-suffering-israel-hamas/675621/>

But if people on the left are reevaluating their political alignments, people on the right may also be reconsidering what they thought to be true. People who have touted their Israel bona fides are proving to be isolationists, and staunch conservatives are finding friends of Israel in the most unlikely places. Consider Ritchie Torres, a gay, Latino progressive Congressman from the Bronx. There is nothing about any of what I just said that would indicate a particular affinity for Israel, yet he is one of its most vocal champions in Congress. Or take Sen. John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, who was known for four things: being extremely liberal, being extremely tall, being a person who lives with mental illness and being a stubbornly informal dresser. Well, he is now known- and often vilified- for being a major supporter of Israel, too. And while lawmakers are calling for humanitarian pauses and ceasefires, it should be noted that the House passed a resolution affirming support of Israel by a margin of 412-10 (the dissenters are, of course, no surprise). I even know of *farbrente* Conservatives who cried at President Biden's speech two weeks ago- people who do not love the President at all, and especially not how he is handling things right now in Israel. But they admit that his support for Israel has been vocal, and that he did travel to Israel during an active war. We can no longer think in terms of D and R- we have to think about Good and Evil, whichever side of the aisle it is found on. And let's not forget about those celebrities who are brave enough to voice their support of Israel, including Madonna, Amy

Schumer and Kim Kardashian (and I hope this is the only time you will hear any reference to them in a sermon)³.

And Jews are not just rethinking who their political allies are- they are rethinking their aspirations. It used to be that attending a prestigious University, especially an Ivy League school or a public Ivy, was the dream of any American Jewish parent. The prestige of attending such a school was enhanced by the secret or overt quotas placed by them on Jewish admissions. It used to be that the discussion about enrollment in secular colleges was whether they are spiritually healthy environments for kids from Modern Orthodox homes. Whether it is the ideas advanced that are often antithetical to Jewish tradition, the culture of political orthodoxy that demands allegiance at all costs or life choices that may be the result of peer pressure in a more permissive environment, it is still very much an open question- one which our Modern Orthodox community is particularly reluctant to engage. But if our community is unconcerned about the *souls* of our children, maybe we are concerned about their *lives*, because many college campuses these days are *physically* unsafe for our kids. Ideas taught on campuses like Colonialism and Intersectionality, whereby Israel is a white, colonizing ethni-nationalist state, have real life consequences. You know about the protests at Penn where people were screaming “When A People Are Occupied, Resistance Is Justified.”

³ <https://jewishunpacked.com/who-are-the-celebrities-supporting-israel-amid-the-hamas-attacks/>

You all know about the 34 student groups at Harvard that signed a letter, while the blood of the victims was still flowing, that laid the blame for the massacre at the feet of the Israelis. At George Washington University, students projected the slogan “*Glory To Our Martyrs*” on the side of a building, and at Washington University, a protest featuring slogans like “*From The River To The Sea, Palestine Will Be Free*” started in a park on campus and then made its way toward Chabad, to intimidate them during their weekly Friday night dinner. And these are just a few examples! There is not much these colleges and universities can or will do to protect Jewish students, because all these protests are met with mealy-mouthed equivocation, insufficient condemnation or support that is too little and too late. I’ve been in contact with our young men and women who are in colleges to check in with them and see how they are holding up. Our kids are articulate, passionate and committed; while they have experienced some of these disturbances, they remain resolute and resilient. Of course, not all colleges are like this, but overall, Jewish students in colleges across the country are not OK. And these are in colleges; if you have children in non-Jewish high schools, you know they are dealing with threats posted on their social media accounts and are being subject to verbal or physical harassment. As a result of all of this, parents have told me they are reconsidering their educational aspirations for their children. *If you have children in high school and below, I sincerely hope you are among them.* I also hope our Modern Orthodox schools stop inviting representatives of such colleges to recruit, stop

encouraging their students to attend, and stop touting admissions to them as a barometer of success.

And since we can't trust anyone else, we are rethinking our relationships with other Jews. In Israel, the entire population has to rethink their preconceived notions about their fellow Israelis. Those who thought Chareidim are nothing but parasitic draft dodgers are now contending with the fact that there is a significant move among that community to enlist in an accelerated format. They see the Chareidim who are members of Zaka, performing the horrifying and heartbreaking task of identifying bodies, or parts of them, in the carnage, working for days on end with no pause. A member of Zaka named Motti Boktchin⁴ went viral the other day, because the horrors of what he saw and the strain of constant work led him to collapse, and to be hospitalized. Thank God, he is ok and recuperating physically, but who knows what kind of trauma he and his colleagues are saddled with for the rest of their lives? If you believe that at any given moment there are 36 Jews who keep the world in existence, you need to believe that it is not always the same 36- *because there are way more than 36 members of Zaka.* Chareidim are traveling around the country doing chessed, giving out food, handing out supplies and hugs to soldiers and evacuees alike. Just yesterday, the Karlin Stolin Rebbe showed up unannounced and unauthorized at an army base. After some

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8euzElc3mow>

negotiation, he was permitted to speak to the soldiers for 15 minutes, during which he told them *"You are fighting the wars of God!"* He blessed them all that they should do what needs to be done, and return home safely and in peace. Together, they sang the song *Yah Echsof*, whose words and tune were composed by the Rebbe's ancestor Rav Aharon of Karlin, and that contain the words- ויהיו רחמך מתגללים על עם קודשך - may your mercy be rolled on to your holy nation.

And the Chareidim who felt that secular Jews were anti-religious, leftist hedonists are contending with the reality that they are defending them personally now- and that there is an upswing in interest in Yiddishkeit as a result of this war. I've heard reports of soldiers on bases lining up to put on Tefillin, and there are many campaigns to make sure each male soldier gets a pair. Yeshiva bochrim are making tzitzis, struggling to keep up with the demand as hundreds of thousands of soldiers have begun to wear them. Parenthetically, I submit that if every man here began to wear tzitzit as well, it would also be an enormous merit for the soldiers. Even if, for some reason, you don't wear a kippah in public, wearing tzitzit is an excellent and unobtrusive way to remind you of who you are. Please let me know how I can help with the logistics of purchasing them.

Leftist Israeli Jews were portrayed by the right-wingers as soulless deserters, trying to uphold an elitist Ashkenazi status quo with their opposition to judicial reform and who

care not at all about Israel's security- but they reported for duty at rates of 150%.

Right-wing Israelis are coming to grips with the awful fact that the Prime Minister they supported on security grounds presided over the most disastrous breach of security in the history of the State of Israel. And the same right wing Jews, who were portrayed by the left as monsters who are trying to knock Israel back into the Stone Age through their right wing racist politics and support of judicial reform, are serving alongside their leftist brethren and maybe aren't so bad after all.

There is a story told about Rav Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), the Satmar Rav, who was known for his virulent anti-Zionism, even as he was a passionate *ohev Yisrael*. Once he was visited by a non-Jewish anti-Zionist to enlist his participation, the Rav yelled at him to leave. The man was incredulous. "I thought you were an anti-Zionist!" The Rav said, "We have certain debates in our family, but we keep it in the family- and you're not part of our family. To the rest of the world, we as a family are a united front!" In essence, everyone is realizing that we are אהותי את- that our bonds as family are strong, and that that we *love* our fellow Jews as family even if there is much we don't *like* about them.

We are experiencing a *hester panim* moment, of that there is no doubt. We have descended into Mitzrayim and the light and passionate relationship with God which we once enjoyed is no longer present for many. We have questions, and platitudes about how everything is going to be amazing, how God will lead us to a miraculous victory,

all sound wonderful and invite optimism and belief, but there really is no guarantee.

Now we have to work on a relationship with God that comes from the other type of

love- אהותי את, the permanence and loyalty of family, of those we love but may not

always like. We may feel this way about God- but in this moment, we are one with

Him. May we witness a redemption from this scary world soon, and may we return to

passionate love במהירה בימינו.