

## Rally Reflections

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In my eight years and counting at Shaare, thank God, I have had many reasons and occasions to be proud to be your Rabbi. Our trip to Washington this past Tuesday ranks right at the top of the list. I was proud that we had a robust minyan when we davened Shacharis unabashedly at the gate (I confess I was also proud that we finished with enough time for me to still secure an aisle seat). I was proud that our Shaare group of over 40 participants of all ages was probably the largest representation from any shul in Dallas, by numbers and certainly by percentage. A member of a different shul in Dallas was so impressed with the welcome our members extended to her, and the ruach we demonstrated, that she is allegedly interested in taking out an associate membership. I was proud to be stopped on the streets of Washington, DC while wearing our "Dallas Stands With Israel" sweatshirt by people who were impressed with how far we traveled. This despite the fact that others traveled from farther away, and that we definitely spent less time in transit than many, including our brothers and sisters from the Northeast who sat in traffic for hours. Sitting together on the flight back from the rally, Ezra Burstein told me, "We will be digesting this experience for days and months

to come.” Indeed, I have been, and this morning, I’d like to share with you a few thoughts that I keep returning to in the days since.

Toward the beginning of Parsha, God blesses Yitzchak that

וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת-יִרְעֵךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנָתַתִּי לְיִרְעֵךָ אֶת כָּל-הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵל וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּיִרְעֵךָ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ:

I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs—

There is a blessing in numbers, and the numbers from Tuesday are most impressive; Close to 300,000 people gathered in what is the largest gathering in American Jewish history to date. The whole event had a feel of a family reunion or a large Jewish block party, with people seeing friends they haven’t in years or meeting new people from locations they’ve never been to. For many people, myself included, it was literally a family reunion: After a lot of coordination, I was even able to spend a few minutes with my mother! But it wasn’t just the *numbers* that were important, or even the family vibe. Think about it: Have you seen footage of any pro-Palestinian protest around the world that *didn’t* deteriorate feature verbal abuse or deteriorate into physical violence? I bet you haven’t, because it hasn’t yet happened. These protests are violent by design<sup>1</sup>, a

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<sup>1</sup> This point is made eloquently by Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein of South Africa here-  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVSspUisxq8>

true fulfillment of Yitzchak's description of Esav, הידיים ידי עשו, the hands are the domain of Esav. Violence and fear are integral to the poisonous worldview the terrorists desperately want to spread. Our rally, on the other hand, was conducted in a hopeful, unified and decorous manner at all times, even though those who attended, and those who spoke, didn't agree on many fundamental issues relating to Judaism and Israel. For example, those holding up LGBTQ flags and Israeli flags together were likely supporting different aspects of Israel than did the many students and administrators of Beis Yaakovs and Yeshivos in attendance. The members of J Street that were present vehemently disagree with people there from the ZOA about what Israel should do now, or next. The many Chabad shluchim and yeshiva students have different theological disagreements than the many whose arms they lovingly and relentlessly wrapped with tefillin throughout the rally. But everyone came, regardless of their differences. As we say in a Siyum, אנו רצים והם רצים - we run and they run; we protest and they protest. The Netziv and other commentators point out that God's blessing of Yitzchak, that the Jewish people will be vast in number and will spread blessing, is less about actual numbers as it is about outcome; wherever Jews are, they will bring blessing to anyone who comes in contact with them. The rally on Tuesday was important, and successful, because it was a *Kiddush Hashem* that positively impacted those who weren't even connected to it at all. I will admit that I generally entertain a dim view of the behavior of Jews *en masse*, having been to kiddush too many times to feel otherwise. I am delighted

that my worries proved unfounded. People brought snacks for law enforcement officials and other personnel deployed to the rally; reportedly, one officer said that he received a career's worth of thank-yous on one shift! On the way home, a TSA agent at Reagan International Airport thanked me for what we did that day, saying that she, too, stands with Israel and would have attended had she not been working. I know I'm not the only one to have that experience. For this alone, attending was worth it.

The second thing that impressed me was the power of spiritual experiences. Rivka is experiencing her first pregnancy, the one for which she waited so long. Yet her pregnancy is so difficult that she doesn't know what to do with herself; per the Ibn Ezra, she described her pregnancy to other women and they told her that what she was feeling was not normal. She didn't know why she was suffering so much, and what she was supposed to do about it. So what did she do?

ויתרצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם-כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרך א-ת-הנה:

But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" When she was experiencing a spiritual crisis, she sought God- for hope, for comfort, for clarity. Sadly, these seem to be elusive these days. Being together with 290,000 other people meant that at least we were sharing the burden, bonded in pain and seeking the same things Rivka did. There was a lot of comment early on, at least before the rally, on the

seemingly secular nature of it; on the schedule, the only prayers delivered were to be by members of Congress, and the only member of the clergy scheduled to speak at the rally was Pastor John Hagee. Now, one can discuss whether any Evangelical pastor would have been the right choice, and whether Pastor Hagee in particular was, but I do understand why no Rabbis were chosen to lead any prayers. Can you imagine the resulting political boondoggle? You'd have to invite Rabbis from all denominations, and then a whole bunch of different kinds of Orthodox Rabbis- it gives me a headache just to think about it. No, this was planned as an event of *shtadlanus*, of political activism designed to convince elected officials that we care, and that we matter. But then something remarkable happened. First, my dear friend and former Shaare Tefilla guest Chazzan, Chaim David Berson of KJ in Manhattan, sang the prayer for the Israeli soldiers, touching everyone with his heartfelt rendition. What had been a secular rally took on a prayerful dimension, which was further enhanced by the Israeli singing sensation Ishay Ribo. If you haven't heard of him before, you did after Tuesday. Ishay Ribo is so popular *everywhere* that he sold out Madison Square Garden during the month of Elul. At that concert, he had 18,000 people screaming the phrase ברוך שם כבוד ועד מלכותו לעולם ועד in the closing of his song about the Yom Kippur Avodah. At the rally, when he saw that there was no *tefillah* on the program, he took matters into his own hands and decided to sing Yosef Karduner's setting of Perek 121, *Shir Lama'alot*, alongside the rest of the set he had planned. It wasn't even his own composition, but he

wanted to make sure people were using the holy occasion of a gathering of Jews to say *Tehillim*. He also led the thronged multitudes in saying *Shema*. 10x or more the number of people that sang with him in MSG sang with him this time, some of the classics *Halev Sheli*, *Vehi She'Amda* and others. Omer Adam joined along with him in singing these songs with religious themes. The Maccabeats also led hundreds of thousands of people in singing "Acheinu," the anthem of this war. Yitzchak's description of Yaakov is most apt- הקול קול יעקב, the voice is that of Yaakov. Prayer and Torah are our strong suit, and they could no better be kept out of the program than be kept out of our lives, especially at times like this, when we need something to grab on to. לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה means to seek divine experiences- not necessarily Torah itself, at least initially. So many people have turned to song in the past five weeks- Carlebach minyanim, Kumzitzes, *tishen* and so on; hundreds of men and women participated in a sunrise minyan in front of the White House, with a long musical Hallel led by Chassidic singer Beri Weber- because singing has a low barrier to entry, it creates community and solidarity, and lets us pour out our heart when our mind is too numb. Being at the rally for these prayerful experiences alone was also worth it. But we can also turn our desire for hope and strength into personal growth in our Torah engagement, too. It was inspiring to see so many spiritual leaders- Rabbis and Roshei Yeshiva among them- who were there with their flocks and brought Torah into this event. My teacher Rav Mordechai Willig from RIETS prepared 8 hours worth of material for shiurim to deliver on the bus- four on the way there and

four on the way back. Rabbi Shmuel Silber of Baltimore delivered a Daf Yomi shiur at sunrise, in front of the White House, before the aforementioned minyan; YU and the OU prepared sources for people to review and discuss on the trip, as did individual shul Rabbis. In the search for connection, for hope and meaning, singing doesn't have to be where it stops.

Finally, a note of caution. One of the fundamental questions we always ask when we approach the narrative of Yitzchak and Esav is how Yitzchak could get his son so wrong. If Esav was such a reprobate, how could his father not notice? The verses themselves give us a clue:

וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת-עֵשָׂו כִּי-צִיד בְּפִיו וְרֵבֶקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת-יַעֲקֹב:

Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob.

Could it be that a man so holy, so seemingly removed from matters of this world like Yitzchak, preferred one son over another because one son was a gourmet chef? Rashi explains further

**בפיו**.. ומדרשו בפיו של עשו, נשנה צד אותו ומרמהו בדבריו:

בפיו [THERE WAS HUNTING] IN HIS MOUTH — ...But its Midrashic explanation is:

there was hunting in Esau's mouth, meaning that he used to entrap and deceive him by his words (Genesis Rabbah 63:10).

In other words, Esav understood that Yitzchak *needed to believe* that, in addition to being an amazing hunter, he was also a *yeshiva bochur*. He calibrated all his actions, and all his words, toward corroborating that narrative. In essence, he only told his father what he knew his father wanted to hear. It is the desire only to hear what confirms our own internal narrative that is, at least in part, what brought us to this tragic mess. Bibi refused to hear any report from his security advisors or those from other countries that indicated trouble was brewing in Gaza; because he believed the West Bank was the real problem, he needed to believe the lie Hamas had masterfully planted by playing the long game- that they had moderated, that they weren't interested in war, that there was no reason to worry about Gaza. Anyone who suggested otherwise was a traitorous deep state agent whose opinions were, at best, ignored and was more likely punished for expressing them. Now, here we are- Gaza *was* a problem, to say the least, and the West Bank remains one. I've already written about the need to evaluate information based not on *how it makes us feel*, but on verified accuracy. This is particularly crucial because so much of what people say, do or circulate is designed to confirm what they already believe. People who already believe that we are living in 1938 Germany, and that now is



the time to make aliyah before it gets much worse, will only focus on the anti-Semitic violence that is running rampant across the world. Those who desperately need to believe that our times are not the same at all will only focus on the state apparatus that prosecutes anti-Semitism, and on the fact that, in Israel, people are killed for being Jews all the time. Those who need to feel hope and optimism will believe and fixate upon any feel-good story in which Jews live and celebrating life, while ignoring some inconvenient truths: That it is five weeks in and we appear no closer to bringing the hostages home than we were five weeks ago; That Hamas still appears remarkably resolute despite suffering losses and setbacks, and that they are somehow are still firing rockets; that the government has not articulated any plan for how this war will end, what it even means to beat Hamas, and what happens if and when they are defeated; that things are heating up on the northern border despite everyone's feverish assertion that "Hezbollah isn't interested in conflict"; that every good deal the Jews have ever enjoyed in *galus* has eventually come to an end. Those who are pessimistic, on the other hand, will seize on these sobering realities yet ignore that we have somehow survived challenges on a much more catastrophic scale. At this rally, not a single speaker uttering even a syllable of substance- but their empty words and the general vibe left me feeling positive and optimistic. In thinking about it, I realized that this is actually an area in which we need to be exceedingly careful. Remember that it was Yitzchak's physical and metaphorical blindness that allowed him to be easily manipulated into giving the

wrong son the blessing. In our desperate need for hope, we cannot let ourselves be blind to truths we'd rather not accept, and must always be careful to retain our powers of discernment. We cannot believe any story we read just because it's what we want to hear. We cannot fall for any speaker just because they use that three word magical mantra, *Am Yisrael Chai*. We cannot believe just anyone who professes friendship and solidarity as "brothers in faith," when their faith is not ours. We cannot instinctively trust any politician who *says* they stand with Israel, unless we check their legislative record.

Whether you were at the rally or not, this event should not pass as just an epic memory. The kiddush Hashem, the need for connection and the search for optimism while maintaining our judgment must all spur us to action, to do *more*- each of us in any way we can. May we continue to gather as Jews- not out of tragedy, not out of worry, but only out of joy.