

Thoughts on a Challenging Week  
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky  
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Exactly a year ago, on Parshat Bechukotai, I stood at this pulpit and delivered a sermon titled “Thoughts on Uvalde.” It’s as if it doesn’t matter what year it is; I desperately hope and pray that a sermon about a mass shooting in Texas is not an annual occurrence. In truth, if we were sensitive, we would speak about this weekly, because these kinds of events seem to happen with that kind of frequency. The horrific shooting in Allen- the gruesome details of which are too horrifying to even contemplate- wasn’t even the only mass casualty in Texas *this week*; there was also the vehicular attack in Brownsville, and before that, a shooting in Atlanta, and at a private Christian school Nashville, and on and on. Of course, it would be easy to write off this attack as the work of a madman and carry on as normal. After all, on a Russian social media platform, the Allen mass murderer, Mauricio Garcia, had admitted to struggling with mental health challenges. Indeed, he had expressed his reverence for those who carried out the mass murder in Isla Vista, California in 2014. But that would be the definition of callousness, and besides, we Jews do not have the luxury of ignoring the attacks of madmen. Mauricio Garcia was a virulent anti-Semite who was armed to his teeth with an AR-15, a handgun and explosives. Who is to say that his deranged rantings couldn’t have been actualized in a shul, *Hashem yeracheim*? Because elsewhere this week, that happened. On Lag Ba’Omer, the El Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba- a site of annual

pilgrimage from around the world on this day- was the site of a shooting that wounded at least nine people, took the lives of two cousins who were visiting, and three police officers. To top it all off, Israelis are once again living under a barrage of rockets from Gaza. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, used to say that one must live with the times- meaning that events that happen are always connected to the parshah that surrounds them. What does this week's Parsha have to tell us about this week's events?

One of the themes running throughout the horrifying predictions of the *tochachah* that we read this week is, indeed, the notion that we Jews are not safe anywhere. The Torah tells us that if the Jewish people fail to heed the word and the commandments of God-

וְאַתֶּם אֲזַרְהוּ בְּגוֹיִם וְהָרִיקֹתִי אַחֲרֵיכֶם חֶרֶב וְהִיתָה אֶרְצְכֶם שְׂמָמָה וְעָרֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ חָרָבָה:

And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you.

Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin.

As retribution for failing to observe the commandments relating to the land God gave us, we will be exiled from it, spread out among the nations. In exile, we will be subject to the destructive force of our enemies, and will be fearful of them even when they're not actually attacking us:

וְהִנְשָׂאֲרִים בְּכֶם וְהִבְאִתִּי מֵרֶדֶךְ בְּלִבְכֶם בְּאֶרְצוֹת אֲבִיהֶם וְרַדְף אֹתָם קוֹל עֲלֵה נְדָף וְנָסוּ מִנִּסְתַּחֲרָב וְנִפְלְאוּ וְאִין רִדְף:

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues.

Immediately after the Torah's horrifying description, though, we find a most interesting and curious juxtaposition. The Torah describes the mitzvah of *Arachin*, of valuations. If a person is so motivated, he is permitted to dedicate his market value- the amount he would fetch if he were to be sold into servitude- and consecrate those funds:

דִּבֶּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ כִּי יִפְלֵא גִדּוֹר בְּעֶרְכּוֹ נִפְשׁוֹת לָהּ:

Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When any party explicitly vows to God the equivalent for a human being.

The Torah doesn't stop there, either. It discusses consecrating one's house, animal or field, too, and the procedures that govern these acts of consecration.

What is the connection between this section, and the *tochachah* that comes before it?

I'd like to suggest that in fact, *arachin* is the antidote to the *tochachah*. As we are cast into exile, we are at the mercy of the murderous whims of our enemies, who are able to fully actualize their murderous designs because we have been left fearful

that anyone can be our enemy, and defenseless in the face of actual attacks. And when those attacks happen, we feel helpless in the aftermath. Shootings need nothing to make them horrifying, but the fear they spread in their wake- the justifiable fear that anyone, anywhere, could be a mass murderer- makes them so much worse, enough to cause emotional paralysis and induce agoraphobia. What exacerbates this terror is how easy it is now for someone to translate hateful thoughts into public pronouncements, and then into action. The refusal of platforms like Twitter and Facebook to regulate any kind of hate speech, and especially anti-Semitic speech, means that Jew-haters, Holocaust deniers and inciters to violence are given free reign to spew their toxic views. From hateful thought to violence and terror- against any race or faith group- is a short step that happens with terrifying frequency, especially where weapons are easily obtainable. Of course, it's not just lone wolf incel gunmen in America; it could be a nameless terrorist in Tunisia, or a driver armed with just a car in Israel, or foot soldiers in Islamic Jihad, all of whom may be backed by sophisticated and extensive funding, their worst thoughts and impulses leading to quick and catastrophic carnage.

In the face of this kind of wanton and impulsive destruction, the kind the *tochacha* presaged, the mitzvah of *arachin* is the perfect response. When seemingly interminable violence rears its ugly head with depressing frequency; when no one has anything to say other than offering vapid thoughts and empty prayers; when

people double down on entrenched thinking rather than searching for creative, responsible and realistic solutions that don't hew to party lines; when Jewish lives are in danger and no one seems to care; it is easy to feel a sense of futility. At times like these, when it seems impossible to change the world and irresponsible to accept it as is, perhaps we would do well to remember the adage attributed to Rav Yisrael Salanter:

*When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.*

Declaring something sacred shows that we can still do something good in the aftermath of incredible destruction. If our enemies can bring their worst thoughts and feelings to fruition with haste, we can take our most positive feelings, and making them real, too. It shows that our thoughts, as expressed in speech, which can be so destructive, can lead to the most positive outcomes as well- especially

when it leads to immediate positive action. Indeed, the Sifra<sup>1</sup>, the Midrashic work on the book of Vayikra explains that the Torah introduces the concept of *arachin* with a language of vows for a reason:

[ד] "נדר בערכך" -- הקיש עירוכין לנדרים; מה נדרים ב'בל תאחר לשלמו', אף עירוכין ב'בל תאחר לשלמו'.

4) *"a vow in your valuation": Vows are likened to valuations. Just as vows are subject to "Do not delay to pay it," so, valuations.*

In the same way that one who takes a vow must fulfill its terms immediately, one who takes an oath to dedicate a valuation must do so immediately.

A positive thought, a worthwhile project for self-improvement- these should be expressed, and ideally acted upon right away. In the midst of a week of darkness, I saw the power of speech and the value of declarations on two different occasions. On Sunday, Jessica and I attended the dedication of the truly spectacular, newly renovated Mikvah. Before the event, we were given a special tour, and by the time we were done, we were in slack-jawed awe. Every tile in the building was selected to provide the most spiritual, spa-line and splendid experience for any woman who uses it. Local singer and social media influencer Dalia Oziel shared a video of it on her instagram page, and it racked up over 80,000 views and many amazed comments. We should be honored that our community boasts a mikvah that may become a tourist attraction. We should be proud that our members, in particular

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<sup>1</sup> Bechukotai 3:4

Susan Hollander and Brett and Roxie Diamond, were involved in its planning. We should be inspired that so many of our members so generously contributed to this project, especially those who joined to dedicate one of the prep rooms in memory of Rebbetzin Wolk z”l, for whom this mitzvah was so precious. Most remarkable, though, is what has happened *after* the dedication. I heard that quite a few women were so wowed by the mikvah that they have promised to begin using it, or would start doing so again. If you are one of these, if you have any questions or concerns or need any kind of refresher on these most important *halachos*, please reach out to Jessica and me, and we are honored to be a resource for your mikvah journey. These kinds of promises generate good in the world, especially when they are fulfilled. If, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe also used to say, one “thinks good and it will be good,” it is certainly true that if one *says* good it will be good. A few days later, as I was dropping the kids off at home after carpool, Shaya turned to me and asked if we could resume our daily study of Mishnah- something we had done for a while and then we had stopped for absolutely no good reason. I immediately stopped the car and dropped everything, and we learned a Mishnah together. The moment he had verbalized it, we acted- because there was nothing else more important and worthwhile that I could be doing in those few minutes. Believe me, I’m not telling you this to show what an awesome father I am. I am telling you this because I am proud of Shaya, who put into words what we had both been thinking. Now that I

am talking about it, I am hoping to create accountability for myself and inspiration for others will follow our lead.

A year ago, I closed with a prayer for the fulfillment of a most apposite verse from this week's Sedrah. As history repeats itself, the prayer and the quotation are still relevant. In the face of darkness and hatred, may we continue to speak about goodness and bring it to fruition, and may we be the agents of positivity and Godliness in the world. And soon, may we merit to see the fulfillment of God's promise to us,<sup>2</sup>

וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִשְׁכַּבְתֶּם וְאֵין מִחַרֵּיד וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי תְהֵא רַעַל מִיְהוָה אֶרֶץ וְחָרֵב לֹא־תַעֲבֹר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם:

I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword- no weapons, no fighting, no carnage, no senseless death- shall cross your land.

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<sup>2</sup> Vayikra 27:6



