

This One's Different  
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As you know, I generally avoid talking about politics from the pulpit. To do so would be a waste of time that can be dedicated to studying Torah together, would be a form of assault against those who hold differing views, would betray my ignorance of the subject at hand and, in some cases, could violate our 501c3 status due to blurring the lines defined by the Establishment clause. It's a fairly safe assumption that, while I certainly have my own views on the issue, I would not normally discuss a loaded topic like yesterday's release of Jonathan Pollard, and what the reaction of the American and Israeli Jewish communities says about us. But I will say this: among his supporters, those who lobbied relentlessly for clemency and leniency and were his voices in the halls of power and the court of public opinion, who could have imagined that his release, the day they waited for and attempted to hasten, would be eclipsed by a tragic event? All us are reeling from the attacks yesterday in Tel Aviv and Gush Etzion, the attacks claiming the lives of two people who were praying Mincha in a grisly reprisal of the attacks exactly one year earlier in Har Nof, the attacks that snuffed out the lives of a beloved Torah teacher, a young American student, and a young Israel father of five including a two month old baby...once again, we find ourselves here and we face the same question we asked last week. When silence is best, what is there to say?

This week, we read the story of Yaakov's transition from being an individual, a single man on the run, to being a family man responsible for the care of two wives, two concubines and 13 children. Much of the stress he had to deal with stems from the tension between his two wives,

the sisters Rachel and Leah, arising in part from the fact that Leah was fertile and Rachel was not, but also from the fact that Rachel was Yaakov's preferred wife over her sister Leah. Indeed, Leah's feeling of rejection manifested themselves in the way she named her first three children: Reuven, in the hope that her husband would *see* that she bore him his first child; Shimon, from the language of שמע, or hearing, in the hopes that God would hear that she was the despised wife, and Levi, in the hopes that *now* her husband would connect with her. This seems to be a regular pattern; every one of her children is saddled with a name that is a barometer of her current relationship with her husband, until she delivers her fourth son, Yehuda.

(לה) וַתַּהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֹּאמֶר הַפְּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־יְקֹנֵק עַל־כֵּן קָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה וַתַּעֲמִד מִלְדוֹת:

*Now* I will thank God. This seems like too little, too late. Why is she only thanking God now, when she should have done so three children ago? Furthermore, the Talmud in tractate Berachos makes a shocking, even bizarre assertion about this statement:

רבי שמעון בן יוחי: מיום שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו לא היה אדם שהודה להקדוש ברוך הוא עד שבאתה לאה והודתו, שנאמר הפעם אודה את ה'.

Is this really true? How could it be that *no one*- not Avraham, not Yitzchak and not Yaakov- had thanked God for *anything* before then?

I'd like to offer an answer based on a comment of Rav Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer of Pressburg offers a beautiful answer in his commentary, Ksav Sofer, on this passage. All of our forefathers who lived before or contemporaneously with Leah experienced many events worthy of gratitude, and they certainly offered it, but those events were usually open miracles. Leah was thanking God for something that was not actually a miracle- it was a natural occurrence that

many people are blessed to experience, but not everyone. She was the first to thank God out of the recognition that what appears to be natural is also miraculous. But why only with Yehuda, and not the other children? You see, mathematically, Leah was “entitled” to three children—certainly according to the view that she knew Yaakov was to father 12 tribes. But when she delivered her fourth child, she realized that she had exceeded her “allotment” and that this was a momentous occasion indeed. Yehuda, she realized, was different; his birth had a different emotional resonance for her; carried with him a different set of hopes and priorities, as he was the child who was her gift— and through his birth, she realized that all her other children were miraculous gifts as well.

I think this explanation of the Ksav Sofer explains why this savage attack has been so shocking for us. On some level, we recognize that the gift that is the modern state of Israel carries with it a heavy price, tragically offered by those fortunate enough to live there and the holy citizens who defend it. Rabbi Shlomo Riskin tells the story of Yosef Goodman, a young man from Efrat who was the son of Mordecai and Anne Goodman, the legendary owners of Pizzeria Efrat. Yosef was an outstanding paratrooper in the Maglan unit who was killed during a routine training maneuver. His parachute and that of his commanding officer became intertwined; if he did nothing, they would both be killed but if he separated then, he would plunge to his death and save his officer’s life. In that split second, he decided to cut the cord, and give his life in exchange. For his hero’s burial at Har Hertzl, his father only had one request of Rabbi Riskin: “Please don’t say this is the price of *aliyah*.” One year later, Mordechai and Anne Goodman came to Rabbi Riskin’s home with a *shayleh*. Their next son Yehuda was about to enlist, and

was desperate to follow in the footsteps of his brother and serve in the same paratrooper unit. As parents of a fallen soldier, they had to grant written permission; in tears, they told Rabbi Riskin that they didn't want to, but knew their son desperately wanted to serve. What to do? After some deliberation, they signed the papers, a decision Rabbi Riskin admitted he didn't think he would have the courage to make if he were in the same position. The next night was Yom Hazikaron. After the local commemoration in Efrat, Rabbi Riskin was invited back to the Goodman home, where there was a part in full swing- welcoming Yehuda to the Maglan unit in the presence of his future comrades. Rabbi Riskin wrote

*“As I slowly and humbly walked home that evening, I finally think I understood Mordecai’s request. Yosef’s death was not the price of aliya- in a difficult and profound way, it was the privilege of aliya. “*

Yes, we may not understand it but still, we realize that those who live in Israel are often called upon to pay the ultimate price, and it is often the best of the Jewish people who are offered as sacrifices. And each time it happens, the same sequence of events occurs. We cry, we say Tehillim, we post outraged posts on Facebook and then read through the raft of resolute editorial pieces from Israelis on Times of Israel. It happens every time, and we watch in solidarity, feeling helpless because this is not the life we are living, or at least not yet- and we are perhaps a little relieved, but also grateful and maybe even a little jealous. Eventually, we become numb, succumbing to grief fatigue. It is emotionally draining to maintain that same level of intense mourning all the time, every time, especially for people we didn't know who often led very different lives from our own.

In joyous circumstances, Leah realized that her son was different, but also that he was so similar to her other children. The awful corollary is that sometimes, it takes a tragedy that is different to teach us about how to relate to all the other ones. Ezra Schwartz was different, because he was one of our own. He was an American teenager on a gap year program, a beloved counselor to many kids at Camp Yavneh, an integral part of the community of Sharon, MA. Indeed, he was known to people from our community as well; He was part of the same program as Jonathan Kravitz, and I learned his name from Clara Wohlstadter, who knew of him as a friend of a friend. Clara called me from Israel and asked me to mobilize the community in the recitation of Tehillim for his well being, a call I sadly never got to make because he passed shortly thereafter. And he was not the only one. Rav Yaakov Don was a favorite teacher of Ilana Wernick's when she was at Midreshet HaRova, and, when he was a Bnei Akiva Shaliach in Toronto, he was a beloved teacher to many students, including a very close friend of ours. Their murder, which hits so close to home, should bring into sharp relief the reality that there really is no difference; it does not matter whether we know the victim or not, does it? Each person killed is special; it is someone's fiancée, wife, mother, father, son, brother, doctor and on and on. And the cruel, amoral beast of terrorism does not distinguish between people we know and people we don't, between people who live in Israel and people who happen to be visiting. In the eyes of our enemies, we have committed one basic, irrevocable crime- we are Jews. How appropriate it is that the child Leah realized was special was Yehuda, the one who gave the name to the people he helped establish- the Yehudim, because we are special- singled out time and again for ridicule, condemnation and death while the world stands by and remains silent, trying to "contextualize" and equivocate, failing to issue condemnations when Jews even as it is justifiably vocal when it is other countries

and ethnic groups who are under attack. And it's not just on a government level- it's in college campuses as well, including right here in UT Austin, just for one example<sup>1</sup>, where twelve students stormed into a lecture by an Israeli professor and called for the destruction of Israel- and then called for the professor to be fired because they felt intimidated when he stared them down! In such a world, where it is increasingly clear that no one will remember or care about Jewish victims, that we must follow the example of Yaakov. After every major event in his adult life, Yaakov builds a *matzevah*, a monument- a physical reminder of what happened to him and what he committed to do in its aftermath. He knew that if he didn't do something, no one else would remember the momentous events that took place. That must be our mandate as well- to raise our voices and advocate for Jewish interest and the Jewish people in any way possible, and to turn the lives of those who were taken from us into monuments. Ezra Schwartz loved Israel unconditionally, loved Judaism and Jews and was known to be a good friend who helped others through difficult times in their lives, so our challenge is to figure out how we can live by his example- what the best way we can show our love for Israel is, whether through travel, political advocacy or charity. Rav Yaakov Don was a beloved teacher of Torah who will never deliver another shiur, will never explain another Rashi, will never serve as the gabbai of his shul each morning as he did in Alon Shvut- so our challenge is to live by his example, studying more Torah and incorporating Jewish communal observance like Tefillah into our daily schedule.

This attack is different, but as we are shaken to the very core of our being, let us use the examples of the lives these precious souls led and lives our lives by their example. And as we

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sjpuncovered.com/ut-austin/>

work for the betterment of our downtrodden people, may we see the fulfillment of that verse we recite each morning-

הוֹשִׁיעָה אֶת עַמְךָ וּבְרַךְ אֶת נַחְלֹתֶךָ וּרְעֵם וְנִשְׂאֵם עַד הָעוֹלָם.