

## **Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Vayigash**

I am troubled; severely so. I read the news and I speak to friends and colleagues. I hear both sides of the nightmare that is the current struggle in Gaza. I understand and appreciate both the claims of Israel and the claims of the Palestinian people. I understand that leadership on both sides is, at best, an oxymoron. I have been in the olive groves with Palestinian farmers when Israeli settlers came with guns. I have held Israeli victims of Palestinian bus bombings. I have friends in east Jerusalem and family in west Jerusalem. I understand that this war is the political tool of people wanting power that uses and speaks for God as one would use a ventriloquist's dummy. And I understand that people are suffering. The cities of S'derot, Ashdod, and Ashkelon live under constant threat of the next rocket. The rockets have not killed many, but they have terrorized everyone, and each of those who did suffer death or injury as a result of these rockets launched from Gaza by Hamas ... was a civilian ... and many have been children. And while these rockets have increased over the last week and a half, they never stopped, even during the "cease-fire;" Hamas kept launching and Israel refrained from retaliating. And I understand the suffering of the civilians in Gaza. Yesterday, a Palestinian reporter admitted on the international news that Hamas was firing rockets from civilian homes. The justification was that there are no open places from which to launch the rockets (if there was justification for rockets, in any event). When I asked friends why they did not evacuate their homes that were being used as launch pads, I was told that they were not allowed. They were intentionally made human shields and civilian targets. The Palestinian people are also suffering. While I understand Israel's need to respond, the response has brought far more loss than can be thought reasonable. The news is starting to pick up on the subtleties of this war. There are warnings before attacks, the borders never closed, the humanitarian aid trucks never stopped, and the Palestinian ambulances pass freely through the borders bringing injured Gazans to Israeli hospitals for care. But, still, there should not be the numbers of casualties needing the care, to begin with. And still, none of this deals with the underlying struggle that keeps this war raging, even in times when physical weapons are not employed. And through it all most people on both sides just want peace. The Rabbis, Priests, Ministers, and Imams all lead prayer services for peace that never seem to reach the ears of leadership, or for that matter, the media, while the power mongers on both sides get credited for speaking for their respective religions, and the powers of the world that intervene as partisans (including the media) serve only to fuel the fire and expand the conflict, but yet bear no accountability for their actions.

And in the middle of my depressive obsessing, I read a commentary gleaned from the teachings of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe. This week we read of the reunion between Joseph and his little brother, Benjamin. Both are the favored sons of their father, for their mother, Rachel, was the favored wife. The text tells us that as the brothers met, they fell on their necks and wept.

While this is usually read to mean that they joyfully hugged to the point that they fell over, the Rebbe recalled a passage from the Talmud (Megillah 16b). The text interprets their tears and hugs as expressions of pain and sorrow over the tragedies that will befall their descendants. "[Joseph] wept over the two Sanctuaries that were to stand in the territory of Benjamin and were destined to be destroyed ... and Benjamin wept over the Shiloh Sanctuary that was to stand in the territory of Joseph and was destined to be destroyed." In truth, the brother's descendants represent the populations that would be the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel – the ones that warred with each other, turning the neck hugs into choke holds that opened the door for others to bring on the destruction of all Israel – sending the descendants of brothers into a 2000 year exile – or in the case of Joseph and the remnant tribes of the north, absolute annihilation.

I took this story back two generations. When Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael meet and weep. I cannot help but read into that text the same acknowledgement of pain between these two brothers. Ishmael is the father of the Arab world. Isaac's line becomes Israel. The stranglehold that was the neck hug between Isaac and Ishmael is serving absolutely to lock both peoples in a dance that will only end in mutual death.

The ultimate question asks what we are willing to do about this horror. Vigils, statements, and letters to the editors may make us feel better, but they do nothing to bring peace when there is strife, to return those brothers now exiled from each other back together in love and peace, or heal any brokenness in the world. 2008 has closed, and this week we close the book of Genesis. Both end on very difficult notes. The economic collapse and the violence that marked the past year mirrors the economic collapse of Egypt and the ensuing abuses and violence fomenting at this point in the Torah. These stories are not new and not unique. What we know from history is clear; where we repeat our past errors, we condemn ourselves to the same bad results. If all we do is point fingers, blame and position ourselves against each other, we will continue the nightmare. Gandhi said that we must be the change that we want to see in the world. There is certainly enough blame to go around for all that is horrifying today. At some point, we must engage each other, even those we call our enemy, and find a way past yesterday into tomorrow. This will mean standing up to a leadership obsessed with power, and it will mean empowering those who feel helpless to act, so that their voices too, may be heard. The first step has to be a realization by all involved that there is a goal loftier and more glorious than victory. So long as they are terrorists and we are imperializing oppressors, our loftiest goals can only be defeating each other. This journey begins with tefilah, a word used often as the Hebrew equivalent for prayer. It really means soul searching. If ever there was a time for us to embark on this journey, each of us, it is time to be the change we want to see, and lead each other on this journey. May it be ... a Shabbat Shalom.

