

**PARSHAT VAYESHEV**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**  
**DECEMBER 17, 2011**

As many of you know, at the beginning of this week Bryna and I returned from Israel through New York where I was proud and humbled to receive an award from Masorti Olami – the world-wide organization of the Conservative/Masorti Movement. The purpose of our Israel visit was to spend time with our family – our children and grandchildren and Bryna's sister and her family. We had a wonderful time with them and it was a pleasure to see them after having been apart for a few months.

Last Wednesday, I had one of the most remarkable and memorable days of my entire life. We had agreed that Hadassa and Haim would take our two oldest grandchildren, Shmuli and Meytal, out of their daycare programs so that we could spend the day together. We made plans to visit the Old City of Jerusalem so that we could all go to the Western Wall and see some of the other sites as we walked the steps and the narrow alleyways of the Old City. We met them at the Jaffa Gate and then proceeded towards the Jewish Quarter. In a relatively few minutes we made it to the Western Wall. Of course, the custom there is for men and women to stand on opposite sides of the Mechitza. So, Haim, Shmuli and I proceeded to the men's side and Bryna, Hadassa and Meytal to the women's side.

We walked to the Kotel and Haim and Shmuli sat down on chairs to recite the Shema and a few of the prayers that Shmuli had learned in his Gan program. I found a book of Psalms, approached the Wall, and began reciting them. Soon it was Haim's turn to recite some Psalms, so I took Shmuli by the hand and we walked under the covered area of the Kotel in the men's section seeing arks filled with Sifrei Torah, Siddurim and holy books and men offering prayers and studying our tradition. At one point, we looked down a very deep hole and saw the bedrock where our ancestors must have stood as they approached the holy Temple to bring their sacrifices on the pilgrimage festivals. I stopped for a minute and thought about that moment. Since that time I have recognized what a great privilege I had been given. What my grandfather, or yours, would have given to walk to the Kotel with his son-in-law and his grandson to offer prayers knowing that he was now present in the sovereign State of Israel able to visit this ancient holy site. How fortunate I am that I was granted that great gift. How important it is that I not take it for granted.

After the few minutes that we stayed at the Kotel, we walked up the steps into the Jewish Quarter and found a spot where we could sit and our grandchildren could have something to eat. Soon the air was aloud with sound as from the minaret near the Kotel a muezzin sounded out the call for Muslim prayer. I don't think Shmuli had ever heard that sound before and he looked puzzled. We explained to him that this was the way Muslims prayed and they did it five times a day. It was in a language we couldn't understand, and it was not our tradition, but we respected their ability to offer their own Tefila. Even at four years old he seemed to understand the gist of our words.

The next day, we all went to mini-Israel which is a miniature model of Israel from the northern most post of Metulla to Eilat in the south. If you have not been there, I suggest you make it part of your next visit. For the kids it was an opportunity to run down the paths and to see boats, trucks, cars, trains, animals as well as some of the sights in Israel as portrayed in these miniature models. When we told Shmuli that the Old City of Jerusalem was up ahead, he ran towards it and looked for the Western Wall. He found it without difficulty. Then we walked around to the other side of the Wall and he saw men on their knees. We told him that this is the manner in which Muslims pray. We recalled the sound of the muezzin we saw who called them to prayer. We walked to another side and in the Christian Quarter churches and heard church bells. We told him that there were other people with their own way of praying and they had a place called a church. It may have been too much for a four-year old to grasp, but I think he understood that there are different people and different ways to pray.

I had my own personal experience in this area to grow in my understanding of multiple religions and faiths the previous week. A number of years ago, I was president of the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago. As such, I still remain on their mailing list and receive all of their material. Two weeks ago, they held their annual retreat. Fortunately, my schedule allowed me to participate. When I was president it was simply a Christian/Jewish group of faith leaders. Over the past ten years it has been enlarged to include not only the Islamic tradition, but many of the Eastern traditions as well. The program for the annual meeting consisted of presentations by some of those faiths that are not familiar to all of us. We heard presentations from the Bahai, Jain, Zoroastrian and Sikh traditions. An invited representative of the Hindu community was not able to attend. These presentations opened my eyes to faith traditions with which I was not necessarily familiar recognizing nuances which were somewhat similar and sometimes very different from my own. All of us sat, listened and learned from our brothers and sisters in faith and, I believe, grew in the process of respecting others even as we appreciated our own traditions.

Many of us have been taught that the last of the prophets, Malachi, spoke of the importance of the universal nature of human existence and of the unity of all humanity. In speaking to the people of Judah he said: "Have we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us?" Very often these words have been used to point to the unity of all humanity and to advance ethical claims about the treatment of different groups on that basis. It is a statement which has taught all of us that we come from a common source, Adam, and are created by the one God. However, within the Book of Malachi, itself, the expression may carry a different meaning. Marc Brettler and Adele Berlin in their book *The Jewish Study Bible* state that Malachi may have intended to convince the Israelites to keep their faith with one another to honor the covenant of their fathers. One interpretation holds that it is said by the Judahites to justify their actions of marrying foreign women. To them, the prophets voice responds "Judah has broken faith" implying that their actions are tantamount to profaning what is holy to the Lord.

I would like to suggest that both of these statements are very important. We do come all from one Father. We all have a common ancestry and we need to have respect

for one another, whatever our mode of worship and our belief pattern may be. On the other hand, we must be truthful to our own tradition, assume responsibility for its continuity and be prepared to declare our loyalty to its faith and values.

In our Haftorah of this morning, the Prophet Amos calls the Israelite people to live up to the lofty purpose of their existence. While our reading opens with an indictment of Israel for its transgressions, it is preceded by indictments against six surrounding nations and the southern Kingdom of Judah. Each commences with the statement: “Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, the Ammonites, Moab or Judah (I will turn away its punishment), for four, I will not revoke it.” and continues with the arraignment. The indictments against the foreigners are for a breach of international commitments, not for transgression against Divine law. This is not the case with Judah and Israel who are expected to live up to a higher standard of ethical living in their own society as they represent the chosen people of God.

This is a crucial way of understanding the difference between Israel and the other nations. We have a higher responsibility to live up to God’s law. We are, according to Isaiah, to be “God’s witnesses” in this world. Thus, each of the nations is held to a standard, because each of them was created by God. We all have one Father. However, the people of Judah and Israel are held to a higher standard for the sins of Judah are “because they have spurned the teaching of the Lord and not observed His laws.” And, those of Israel are “because they have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals.”

These lessons I think are very important both for Shmuli, who lives in Israel, and for his Saba who lives in the Diaspora. Shmuli lives in a society where Jews are the majority and, yet, has the responsibility to care for the minorities among them. From its very beginning, Israel professed equality for all religions and tolerance for all faiths and beliefs. It is only under the State of Israel that all religious holy places are opened to all. That was not the case, as we all know, from 1948 to 1967, when the Old City was under the control of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. As a Jewish state, Judaism is the dominant religion, but since we all have one Father, there must be the realization that all peoples must have the freedom of worship to observe their own heritage and faith.

In the case of Shmuli’s Saba, and those who live in the Diaspora, we represent the minority among the majority. In this country we can be proud of the fact that we can live as identifiable proud Jews in the midst of a majority culture. However, it is exactly at this time of year that we recognize that we are in the minority. Though I will receive Hanukkah wishes from the media and from our general culture, I recognize that I live in surroundings that are not based upon my own tradition. It is at moments like these that I must live by the lessons of Malachi, who understood that we all have one Father, that we must show respect for all others, but at the very same time uphold my own responsibilities to our faith, our people and our ancient heritage.

Whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, there will always be continuing challenges. We are a very small people, even if we are the majority in one country, and we have been

taught that all people must be respected and given their due rights. We are, as a Jewish people, held to a higher standard whether we like it or not. We believe that we are God's chosen people not because we are better, more numerous or more mighty. It is because we are to be witnesses to the unity of God, to the sanctity of life, to the mission of being God's holy people here on earth.

I will never forget the day I spent with our family in the Old City and stood at the Kotel on Ha Ma'aravi, the Western Wall. I hope that both Shmuli and I will never forget the lesson of standing at the Wall, hearing the muezzin call for Muslim prayer and seeing the churches in the vicinity and listening to their bells toll. The lesson for all of us is to remember who we are, be proud of our ancient heritage and live up to its vision and high standards and, at the same time, always be respectful and tolerant of others. May we always act as brothers and sisters to all people in this world who are willing to extend their hands to us in peace, in understanding and in love. May we embrace them and create a world in which both Shmuli and his Saba can live in peace, security and harmony.