

PARSHAT VAYESHEV
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The opening section of Vayeshev outlines the enmity that developed between Joseph and his brothers, stemming from the favoritism that Jacob displays for young Joseph over his other sons. Witnessing this favoritism, the brothers reacted harshly. “When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.” Rashi explains that this teaches us that their hatred caused them to refuse to speak with Joseph at all. Eighteenth-century sage Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshitz of Prague derives an important insight into the causes of dispute and discord, by understanding the verse in a novel manner. Rabbi Eibeshitz notes that the brothers’ refusal to speak with Joseph actually increased and inflamed their hatred towards him. “Had they spoken with him, perhaps they would have achieved peace. This is the essence of every dispute, that the [disputing parties] never enter into dialogue, for neither one wishes to listen to the other and understand him...” Joseph’s brothers’ refusal to even speak with him not only demonstrated their hatred for him, but it also caused their enmity to grow and prevented the possibility of reconciliation and peace.

While I was in Israel one of the main topics of the press and communal discussions had to do with the Jewish settlement of Amona. The possibility of a major conflagration between those who were supporters of the settlement and the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces was feared by the government and the general population. The government was ready to give permission for other settlements to stay in place, but this was a special case.

Amona is an Israeli outpost in the central West Bank. Located on a hill overlooking Ofra within the municipal boundaries of the Mateh Binyamin Regional Council, the village was founded in 1995 on privately owned Palestinian land. The High Court of Israel ruled in 2006 that the settlement is illegal under Israeli law. In May 2014 an Israeli police investigation revealed the entire outpost lay on private Palestinian land, and that documents used by settlers to claim they had purchased the sites were forged. In December 2014, the Israeli High Court ordered the state to completely evacuate and demolish the settlement within two years.

With just days to go before a looming deadline for a court-ordered dismantling of this Israeli settler outpost, Amona’s residents agreed last Sunday to a government proposal to relocate many of their homes to an adjacent plot of land on the same West Bank hilltop.

The deal was intended to avert a forced evacuation that many feared could turn violent. Tires were piled up by the roadside on the approach to the outpost, ready to burn and hamper the arrival of the security forces. Hundreds of supporters, mostly teenagers, had holed up in a makeshift synagogue and in residents’ homes, poised to resist the removal of the outpost’s 42 Orthodox Jewish families, around 300 people. Protesters banged on the car of a visiting government minister and threw eggs at it.

Hours before the residents voted on the deal, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged them to accept it, and they did. It is hoped that once the agreement was accepted that there will not be the violence which was threatened between those who supported the settlement and those who are involved in carrying out orders. While the passions are still quite high, hopefully, cooler heads can prevail.

Last week, the ultra-Orthodox Shas party introduced new legislation designed to circumvent the government resolution for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel. The bill would prohibit any practices at the Kotel that are not deemed Orthodox. It would prevent men and women from holding mixed services at the area known as the southern section of the Kotel which was designated as the site for egalitarian prayer by the government resolution. It would also provide the Orthodox run Chief rabbinate and Israel's rabbinical court with sole jurisdiction over the Western Wall. Those who violate its restrictions would face heavy sanctions; six months in prison or a 10,000 shekel fine.

We are very concerned, all of us, about the relationship between Israel and the diaspora. Those of us who are not Orthodox, but care deeply about the State of Israel, its citizens and its future, recognize that the Kotel is a symbol for us all. We had hoped that the compromise that had been worked out between the Jewish Agency, the government of Israel, the Rabbinate of the Kotel, and the religious movements, and acceptable to all, would be quickly executed. The government had accepted the compromise, but has refused to move forward. Now that Shas has come up with this bill it threatens the very relationship between Jews of the diaspora and the Jews of Israel. We will not accept this kind of legislation. I have been asked to write a letter to a Knesset member whom I met in October and have done so, to tell him of our deep resentment of this type of attitude.

Here in this country there are deep divisions, many of them caused by the latest issues related to the election. The JCRC of Chicago has issued a statement in the hope that the divisions can somehow be bridged. They have asked the major organizations, as well as Jewish institutions, to sign on to it. We as a synagogue did so. I know that the leadership of the Federation is very concerned about deep divisions in the Jewish community caused by the election and the passions associated with it. Here is some of the language of the Resolution:

“As Jews in America, we are blessed – as are all citizens – with the constitutionally guaranteed and socially encouraged right to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square. Exercising that right strengthens our democracy.

With growing concern, we have seen some members of our Jewish community – from across the political spectrum – engage in discourse in ways that both reflect sharp national divisions and foster Jewish communal ones. The views and humanity of others with different opinions on Israeli or American politics are too often treated in ways that erode decency, civility and respect, and too often the attacks become personal.

We have seen disrespectful behaviors take place at communal events, online and in inter-personal discussions. Sometimes these expressions have become verbally aggressive and menacing. It is not uncommon for today's offender to become tomorrow's victim. The results of such encounters are emotionally taxing on the targeted individuals, an affront to our Jewish values, and a setback to all that we seek to build together.

JCRC calls upon our community to exemplify the noble Jewish ideal of *derech eretz* (common decency). We will not allow our arguments to devolve into *sinat chinam*, or baseless hatred. Instead, we will respect the majority and minority opinions in our community; we will focus our comments on the substantive issues and not blame, attack, or condemn others; and we will listen with an open heart, recognizing that we can learn from each other.”

This evening we begin the commemoration of the holiday of Hanukkah. For most of us it is a minor festival in which we celebrate the Maccabean victory over Antiochus and the Syrian Greeks. It has become a holiday of the spirit and the lights symbolize the joy for all of us. Yet, there is an enormous amount of history behind the festival which we somehow seem to either forget or do not wish to associate ourselves.

The most pronounced example of brotherly enmity determining national disaster is the larger story of the Maccabean dynasty. The initial victory of the Maccabees is not the only theme associated with Hanukkah. There are other themes which tarnish the celebration of Judah Maccabee's victory. Preceding the Hasmonean rebellion it is the competition among the Jerusalemites for control of the Temple treasury which leads to a virtual civil war among Jews and which helps precipitate the issuance of the genocidal decrees of Antiochus. Matityahu and his Hasmonean family do step forward and lead the insurrection which will drive the Syrian Greeks out of the Temple and lead to sovereign independence. But then the later Maccabees of the period of John Hyrcanus and Alexander Yannai and their heirs witness the gradual decay in the nation's fortunes. Essentially it will be divided loyalties among the Jews themselves – the civil strife between the brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobolus II – that will serve to invite Rome into Jerusalem and to eventual disaster, loss of sovereignty, national humiliation and exile. It will be an exile of two millennia in which the Children of Jacob-Israel will carry on the search for fraternal love.

In all of these cases when brother has been set against brother, the Jewish people have suffered. Whether it was in Canaan or in the times of Hasmoneans, whether it is today in Israel or here in the United States, we must learn to talk with one another, respect one another, and live with one another. We are a very small people with a common past and, I believe, a common future. I believe with all my heart, and have based the practice of my rabbinate upon it, that “all Israel is one fellowship.” This must be our goal. It is incumbent upon each and every one of us to make sure that we respect our brother and sister even if we passionately disagree with them. Only if the arguments are for the purpose of heaven and we learn to respect one another can we, as a Jewish people, continue to thrive in the future with a united vision and purpose.