

*The following sermon was written for the morning of Shabbat Parashat Toledot at Congregation Sons of Israel. In light of the Israel's recently initiated Operation Pillar of Defense—fighting off rockets Hamas has been sending into Israel—many congregants rightfully felt the need to speak rather than to be spoken-to on Saturday morning. The sermon was not delivered in services, for it was obvious that it was not these words that needed to be said in the moment, but the words from the hearts of the congregation.*

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It is tough to know what it is that we seek in difficult times.

Because I've been at a loss for words throughout the past few days, I sought consolation in a source very familiar to my generation: Facebook.

It's easy for us to get angry and to get offended when discussing war, but at a certain point we might find ourselves incapable of doing anything else but praying. Our anxiety translates into anger, and our anxiety translates into sadness. Upon resignation, we pray. We pray because it is too lonely to *be* intensely in our heads. To overcome the loneliness of our soul, we send our thoughts in somebody else's way—our family, our friends, God, a journal, or maybe somewhere on the Internet.

Yesterday, my classmate and friend Max Yadin wrote the following on Facebook:

*ABC news reports that, "Palestinian militants fired a rocket aimed at Jerusalem on Friday, setting off air raid sirens throughout the city". The name Jerusalem/Yerushalayim comes from the Hebrew word meaning peace and wholeness (shalem). A sad reminder of the chasm separating the dream of peace that all decent people harbor on behalf of Israelis and Palestinians, and the present reality with which we are all grappling.*

*On Friday evening - the advent of the Jewish sabbath - we recall that God created the*

*world, and in creation all of existence stands in relationship to itself. All is part of one cosmic whole. The divisions that separate us are mere illusions, meaning that when we harm each other we harm ourselves.*

*I pray that Hamas and other militants in Gaza come to see that targeting Israeli civilians is not only unjust, but spiritually destructive for themselves. I pray that the Israel Defense Forces does all it can to limit the effects that its response to Hamas rocket fire has on Palestinian civilians. But these are only short term solutions.*

*This shabbat, I pray that we come to realize or reaffirm that we are all members of one human family and one cosmic whole. I pray that Jerusalem truly becomes a city of peace and wholeness. I pray that both Israelis and Palestinians recognize the inalienable rights of the other. Every enemy is a long lost brother; an alienated part of the self.<sup>1</sup>*

Upon stumbling upon Max Yadin's prayer, I was deeply moved. The words I had sought had finally been captured in words, and I could now utter them: an admittedly *complicated* prayer.

I feel sick of war, and I feel sick of Israel's restraint from retaliation, and I feel sick of Palestinian violence, and I feel sick of policies that hurt innocent Palestinians, and I feel sick of feeling separated from the other. I feel sick of war, and I don't know how else to silence a terrorist. I don't know what I want between now and then, but I hope it will end in peace.

You might have heard that, yesterday, Barack Obama spoke with the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Obama and Erdogan are reported to have "expressed their common desire to see an end to the violence."<sup>2</sup> Personally, I'm glad to hear that they both want

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1. November 16, 11:37 PM at <http://www.facebook.com/max.yadin/posts/4143212618496>.

2. From *Haaretz*, "Obama, Netanyahu discuss situation in Israel and Gaza;" Natasha

the violence to end, but—with a statement that vague—I'm not sure that they have any ideas about how to end the violence. Furthermore, I don't know if the way the Turkish Prime Minister wants to see the violence end is the way that I want to see the violence end.

Sometimes in prayer and politics, we find ourselves saying mantras that feel good but don't change things: "Peace now," "Yes we can," "We can change it." Despite the certainty of such slogans, repeating words will take us—if anywhere—right back to where we began.

Rockets hit Israel. Israel retaliates. We hope for peace. Violence continues. We pray again for peace. Violence ensues. We despair. Violence escalates. We pray harder. The cycle continues... until a half-hearted agreement is reached. But Israel knows of Palestinians with highly destructive weapons. And Palestinians suffer from Israel's close monitoring and restrictions of their activities. Palestinians distrust Israelis, and Israelis distrust Palestinians. Not all of them, but—as a culture—yes. Things settle for a while, but nothing was really ever settled, so the cycle begins again.

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same over and over again and expecting different results. Jews in fact learn a different lesson about repetition. In your *Siddur Sim Shalom*<sup>3</sup>, turn to page 653. At the top of page 653, we read the original ending of *Pirkey Avot*—this collection of Rabbinic wisdom in the *Mishnah*, compiled at the beginning of the 3rd Century CE. If you were to turn to page 654 or 655, you would see the beginning of a chapter

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Mozgovaya;

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/obama-netanyahu-discuss-situation-in-israel-and-gaza.premium-1.478499> and elsewhere.

3. Edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow in 1985, Rabbinical Assembly: New York, NY.

written a few centuries after the *Mishnah*. Instead, on page 653, we read a statement from Ben Bag Bag about how to approach an end, and how to begin a cycle.

Ben Bag Bag taught:

(*ha-FOH BAH veha-PEH BAH*) הַפְּנֵה בָּהּ וְהַפְּנֵה בָּהּ

The translation here says, “Study it and review it,” but I would translate it differently. The first word, “הַפְּנֵה” (*ha-FOH*), literally means to “change” or to “turn” or to “revolve.” In fact, the word “הַפְּנֵה” (*ha-FOH*) here is related to the modern Hebrew word for “revolution.” “מְהַפְּכָה” (*maha-pe-HAH*). I would translate הַפְּנֵה בָּהּ וְהַפְּנֵה בָּהּ (*ha-FOH BAH veha-PEH BAH*) as “Turn it and twist it...”

(*de-HO-la BAH*) דְּהוּלָא בָּהּ

For all is within it.

Ben Bag Bag says: Contained within the Torah is every single human experience and all of the worthy answers in the universe. The Torah is whole and contains all, whether you can see it or not. “You will find everything in it.”<sup>4</sup> If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again—from a different angle.

(*ha-FOH BAH*) הַפְּנֵה בָּהּ

Turn it around,

(*veha-PEH BAH*) וְהַפְּנֵה בָּהּ

And twist it around.

(*ha-FOH BAH*) הַפְּנֵה בָּהּ

Rotate it,

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4. Translation from our *Siddur Sim Shalom*.

(veha-PEH BAH) וְהָפַךְ בָּהּ

And revolve it.

You'll eventually find what you're looking for.

Einstein says insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Judaism is doing the same thing over and over again from slightly different angles and getting new results.

In today's *parashah*, *Toledot*, there is a story we won't read in our community, since we will focus on a different section of today's Torah reading, but it is a story Einstein would call "insane" and Ben Bag Bag would call "Jewish."

Upon a famine taking over the land of his inheritance, Isaac leaves for the Land of Gerar. In Gerar, Isaac gets thirsty and, knowing that the locals stopped up all the wells that his father Abraham had dug, Isaac digs a new well. But the locals fight with him there. So he has to dig another new well. Just like last time, the people fight with him. And Isaac performs again an act of Einsteinian insanity and Ben Bag Baggy Jewishness. He digs another well. But, this new location works out somehow. New angle. New location. This time, not contested. Isaac is a Jewish success story. He's got a well all to himself and to his family, at long last.

Isaac's tale though is a story far removed from our present reality. Who is right when it comes to war? Einstein, or Ben Bag Bag? And, *what* about *this* war will make *this* war different from all other wars? Will there be revolution? Will there be resolution? Will we be upset? Will we be settled? And most of all: will we have to see a war like this again?

In our *parashah*, Rebecca is granted two children in her womb—this, after years of infertility. But the two sons inside her—Jacob and Esau, understood to be the forerunners of the Jewish people and their enemies—are fighting inside the belly of the matriarch. Rebecca is

beside herself, and—unsure of what she seeks—she goes to seek God. Rebecca asks:

אִם-כֵּן (EEM KEN)

If this is true,

לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי (LA-mah ZEH a-NO-hee)

Why is this me?

Rebecca's question is: Why must I give birth to two nations who fight each other? And why do they consume my existence? Why is there a war inside me? Why is this going to last?

לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי (La-mah ZEH a-NO-hee)

Why has this become me?

Let us pray that, though we have seen war so many times before, this one will be different. Though we don't know how, let us let this war end in peace, in understanding, and in sympathy. let us see Jerusalem, the City of Peace. Let us dig our own wells of wisdom and sustenance. Let us know how truly good it is when God's children do not fight in God's womb, Earth. Let our leaders lead us to safety, restoring the self as we meet our loving other. Let this all happen soon. And let us all say: Amen.