

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Vayera

Who are the Real Defenders of Human Rights?

Demonizing the Israel Defense Forces

I'm grateful for living in that Land of Israel, and although the State of Israel is far from perfect, (who is perfect anyway?) I'm thankful to live in Israel under our own Israeli government rather than living in Israel during the British mandate or under the Ottoman Empire. Thank G-d for the IDF, the brave soldiers, and the morality with which it operates. I'm grateful for having a source of Honest Reporting rather than the brainwashed twisted media that many of my family members and friends are being fed. It is unbelievable how after the atrocities Israel has suffered by the cruel barbarian enemy, who purposely targets civilians, world politics are trying to demonize the Israeli army and Israelis in general. For example, Amnesty International declares: "On 21 October 2023, the Israeli army dropped leaflets on northern Gaza ordering residents' immediate "evacuation...Israeli army threats ordering residents of northern Gaza to leave may amount to war crimes." Although my husband is my personal news reporter because I generally don't have time to follow politics, I was shocked when I came across several articles testifying how the media are condemning Israel and twisting the IDF's caring warning that civilians evacuate Gaza in order to save their lives. Rather than disclosing the IDF's humanitarian message to the civilians in Gaza, (Read IDF's message to the civilians in Gaza) the world is now accusing Israel of genocide. Not only the UN, but even in the USA, California city officially backs Palestinians, and accuses Israel of 'ethnic cleansing.' IDF stands for Israel's Defense Forces, this war and every other war Israel has been forced to wage throughout its existence is for the sake of defending our lives. Never has there been a war of attack initiated by IDF, but rather every single war in Israel is a response to terrorism and violence that threatens the survival of Israel. Encouraging the civilians in Gaza to evacuate to save their lives is following the directives of the Torah on the correct way of warfare as described in the Book of Yehoshua, who sent three letters to the Canaanites before entering the promised land. At first, he sent them: 'Whoever desires to flee, should flee.' Afterward, he sent a second message: 'Whoever desires to accept a peaceful settlement, should make peace.' Then, he sent again: 'Whoever desires war, should do battle.' (Rambam, *Mishna Torah, Laws of Kings, and Wars* 6:5).

Avraham's Compassion for Humanity is Passed Down to the People of Israel

The precepts of peacefulness and compassion are paramount in Judaism. Every prayer we utter ends with the word Shalom. In *Parashat Lech Lecha* we read about the very first world war which Avraham entered to save Lot. Although Lot had parted ways with him, Avraham immediately understood the nature of moral responsibility and risked his life to save him. Even though Lot chose to live where he did with its attendant risks, Avraham didn't say, "His safety is his responsibility, not mine." The war of the four against the five kings sets the template for Israel's motives for its involvement in wars. First of all, it teaches us that the basic relationship between the Jewish people and the world is one of struggle and combat, as this relationship was established at the very beginning of proto-Jewish history. Secondly, we learn that the reason Avraham entered the war was - unlike other nations, who war to conquer territories - only to save lives. This is the repeated pattern of Israel's war history. "The deeds of the Fathers (and Mothers) are a sign for their children." In *Parashat Vayera*, Avraham prays to save the city of Sodom,

despite its depravity.

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק כג וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵפֶה תְּסַפֵּה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע: (כד) אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתֵן הָעִיר הָאֵפֶה וְלֹא תִשָּׂא לְמַקְוֶם לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְּדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ: (כה) חֲלִלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע וְהִיָּה כַצְּדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כֹּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

“Avraham approached and said, ‘Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?’” (*Bereishit* 18:23-25).

I’m grateful to be a descendant of Avraham who demonstrated his care and love for all of humanity and did everything in his power to avoid killing innocent ‘civilians.’ He dared to stand up against G-d and his compassion extended even beyond Divine compassion. This attitude of care for human life has been reflected in the Jewish people ever since Avraham set his example to plead for the people of Sodom.

The Role Model of Jewish Leadership Shows Compassion and Care for Humanity

Rabbi Yonatan Sacks explains how Avraham’s encounter with Hashem was the very first time a human being challenged G-d Himself. The people of Sodom were not Avraham’s brothers and sisters, so he was going beyond even what he did in rescuing Lot when he prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom. He did so because he understood the idea of human solidarity, immortally expressed by John Donne: No man is an island, Entire of itself ... Any man’s death diminishes me, For I am involved in mankind (John Donne, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII). G-d himself hinted to Avraham to challenge him saying,

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק יז וְהַשֵּׁם אָמַר הַמַּכְסֶּה אֶנִּי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה: (יח) וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיָּה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעַצוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:

“Hashem said, ‘Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing? For Avraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him...’” (*Bereishit* 18:17-18).

Avraham’s pleading to protect the lives of the people of Sodom obviously wouldn’t be able to change Hashem’s mind, so why did Hashem reveal His plan to destroy Sodom to Avraham? Rabbi Sacks explains that since Avraham was to become the role model and initiator of the Jewish people, he had to have the courage to challenge G-d if his descendants were to contest human rulers. We Jews walk in Avraham’s footprints and rather than accepting the evil in the world, we challenge it in the name of what the world ought to be. This is a critical turning point in human history: the birth of the world’s first religion of protest – the emergence of a faith that challenges the world instead of accepting it. Avraham took moral responsibility and became the first role model of Jewish leadership (Based on Rabbi Yonatan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation, Answering the Call, Vayera* • 5774).

Why is the World Blinded from Perceiving That Israel Has the Right to Defend Itself?

By giving the civilians in Gaza warnings of forthcoming attacks and encouragement to leave to save

their lives, IDF continues Avraham's legacy. By disclosing their upcoming move and sacrificing the benefit of surprise attacks, the Israeli army allows themselves to be at a disadvantage for the sake of humanity. Is it IDF's fault that Hamas cares less about the lives of their own people than Israel does? Why is Israel being condemned when the civilians of Gaza could be saved if only the Hamas terror group wouldn't continue to use the residents of Gaza as human shields and prevent them from evacuating to the south, by threats and placing barriers? If the various defenders of human rights would care just a tiny bit about Israel's right to exist, as well as about the lives of the civilians in Gaza, then instead of sending them financial help used for terrorism against Israel, they would help those who don't support Hamas relocate to a safer place. Unfortunately, in war, it is impossible to avoid casualties. Why can't the world media understand the difference between purposely targeting civilians like Hamas, and Israel who are trying to avoid hurting the innocent by all means? Why are world leaders blinded from perceiving that Israel has a right to defend itself and that Hamas couldn't care less about their own people, whose lives they purposely endanger, to force IDF to cause casualties? Why is Israel accused of war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and more when we are up against a heinous enemy no less evil than the people of Sodom upon which the compassionate G-d decreed total destruction?

Anyone Who Deviates from Evil is Deemed Insane

I believe the answer to all these questions is found in the Talmud which predicts the various signs of redemption. One such sign of redemption is that truth will be lacking.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צ"א והאמת נעדרת שנאמר ותהי האמת נעדרת (וסר מרע משתולל) מאי ותהי האמת נעדרת אמרי דבי רב מלמד שנעשית עדרים ועדרים והולכת לה מאי וסר מרע משתולל אמרי דבי רבי שילא כל מי שסר מרע משתולל על הבריות...

...And the truth will be lacking, as it is stated: "And the truth is lacking [*ne'ederet*], and he who departs from evil is negated" (*Yeshayahu* 59:15). What is the meaning of the phrase: And the truth is lacking [*ne'ederet*]? The Sages of the study hall of Rav said: This teaches that truth will become like so many flocks [*adarim*] and walk away. What is the meaning of the phrase: "And he that departs from evil is negated"? The Sages of the study hall of Rabbi Sheila said: Anyone who deviates from evil is deemed insane by the people (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 97a).

Yes, truth is lacking and those deviating from evil are certainly called insane today. When a bill repealing sections of the 2005 Disengagement Law was passed in its first reading in the Knesset plenum in March 2023, labor leader Merav Michaeli told Army Radio it "gives the crazy settlers permission to do whatever they want in Judea and Samaria, and to hell with Israel's security." Would Merav dare to claim that the disengagement from Gush Katif (the thriving Israeli communities in Gaza) brought greater security to Israel and the world?

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayera

- **Give Thanks to the Soldiers** – Fill your heart with gratitude for our dear soldiers and guards who risk their lives to protect us. Whenever you pass by a soldier, thank him for protecting you. You can also express your gratitude by bringing the soldiers goodies, or even more important vital things like masking tape, a tourniquet, a first aid kit, and black markers. Pray for the protection of our soldiers daily and dedicate learning and mitzvot to their safety.

- **Notice how the current war is making people rise to their higher selves** – Since this war began I've noticed how people including myself are trying to better ourselves. After initially having said “no” to welcoming a difficult person to my home as a Shabbat guest, because I was overwhelmed with all my responsibilities, I immediately regretted it and called her back to invite her. The guest was very grateful and exclaimed, “Thank you, this is really the right thing to do at this time.” Her words reflected my own penitent thoughts. This war is helping us become better people and do the right thing, however challenging it may be.
- **Pay attention to how the current war is affecting the people around you to become better people.** Notice their effort to be more kind and helpful. Feel gratitude for the nice things people in your life are doing or saying and express your gratitude to them.
- **Smile and show a positive attitude to everyone who crosses your path.**
- **Thank Hashem for the War** – How can we thank Hashem for our current grueling war situation where blood is being spilled and our lives and especially the lives of the soldiers are in danger? This level of gratitude is a tall order to fill. Rebbe Nachman of Breslev teaches that before a person is granted a miracle, he is tested with trouble. The bigger the miracle he is about to receive, the bigger the test and trouble. When we look at our troubles, trials, and tribulations, through the eyes of emunah and thank Hashem for them, because we strongly believe that everything Hashem does is for the best, then we merit a major miracle. With this attitude of gratitude, let's try thanking Hashem for all our hardships, even for the war.
- **Try making the following statement of emunah:** “Hashem, I know that everything You do is absolute loving kindness. And I know that You always do what's best for me. Therefore, I know that this awful war is for my ultimate good, to test my emunah and correct my soul. I want to express my appreciation!” When the person decides to be strong in emunah, the *din*/judgment turns into *rachamim*/mercy; the severe judgments become loving-kindness. The belief in Hashem turns the harsh trial into a tremendous deliverance! He who is happy with tribulations sees salvation. One who withstands tribulations receives miracles. (Rebbe Nachman, *Sefer Hamidot*).
- **Besides the war, I've been going through some difficult upsetting challenges lately.** My natural inclination is to complain about it, and the people who are causing me these hardships. After having fallen into that trap, I pulled myself up and thanked Hashem for my challenges realizing that surely, this annoying hardship was sent by Hashem for a reason. Most likely I must go through this pain to atone for mistreating someone inadvertently. So, instead of being upset about it, I work on welcoming this suffering, realizing how it cleanses my soul!
- **Whenever we find ourselves in a very difficult situation without understanding the process let us keep the attitude of gratitude and connect the seemingly inexplicable with trust in the Creator!** When we preserve the attitude of gratitude under duress, then with Hashem's help the most beautiful outcome manifests.