

As a kid that grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, you might think that antisemitism has been a worry of mine all my life. But the truth is, I wasn't too cognizant of it until I actually made my homes in much bigger urban areas. There was the time during rabbinical school when I went to a Dodger's game wearing a kippah and as I walked out had someone call out, "hey Jew Boy, nice hat!" Physically harmless? Sure. Painful nonetheless? Absolutely. And now here in New York, on almost every trip into the city I wonder to myself, do I keep my kippah on or should I just go with a hat today and blend in?

I don't need to remind anyone in this room about the frightening rise in antisemitism in our country. In December alone, there have been incidents in Missouri two times, Montana, Michigan two times, South Carolina, Virginia three times, Florida three times, New Jersey two times, Iowa, and Ohio. And that's not even reporting the unreported.

Then of course, there was a recent incident where a swastika was found at White Plains High School. It is all over the news with messages of hate amplified by powerful people with platforms: musicians, sports stars, and politicians spouting antisemitism or playing footsie with people that want to harm Jews

For a long time, I didn't want to admit to seeing antisemitism lurking around every corner. In part, I felt as if if cries of antisemitism were weaponized to demonize a particular group. The Black community? They hate the Jews. Arabs? They hate the Jews? The Left? They hate the Jews? Evangelicals? They're just using us to get to the rapture, another sneaky form of anti-semitism. It all felt so polarized and so I didn't want to wade in those waters. But now, unfortunately, it feels different.

I am not going to delve into the specifics of what these folks have been saying. I am sure you know them. Nor am I going to offer a detailed analysis of the pernicious way that antisemitic tropes are mainstreamed as a way to legitimize hate. There's the overt stuff, that in theory society deems unacceptable although that window has shifted.

And then there's the covert stuff that is seen in some circles as acceptable in a more regular way; think the way Jews are portrayed as controlling media, the banks, or saying I have Jewish friends so I can't be antisemitic." I'll leave that deep dive to the blogosphere and pundits.

I want to talk today more about what we feel when faced with people that want to harm us and how we might respond to it.

Because the harsh truth is this stuff has been going on forever. After all we know what we sing on Pesach in *v'bi she'amda*, אלא שבכל דור, *ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו*, *in every generation they're coming to get us.*

As true then as it is now.

That's scary. It's a fear we all feel. But we can also face our fears and learn to act. That's where and how we find our namesake in the Torah this week.

Last time we saw Yaakov and Esav together, Esav swore that once their father's mourning period was over, he was going to kill Yaakov for his multiple acts of deceit. So it's not shocking that even after some time has passed, this week's parsha opens up with Yaakov preparing strategically for his encounter with his brother. After all, make a mistake here and bad things will ensue. Reason to fear? Absolutely.

But after all, it has been a long time, so when Yaakov's messengers come back to him with the report that Esav is coming to meet him too and he has 400 men with him, it's ambiguous enough of a report to send Yaakov into a tizzy. "He's also coming to meet you" Perhaps they're meeting with the same positive intentions?

With 400 men though? That's a deep crew that portents potential danger.

It is with that thought lurking that leads the Torah to tell us the following thing:

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצְרָר לוֹ וַיִּחַז אֶת-הָעַם אֲשֶׁר-אִתּוֹ וְאֶת-הַצֹּאן וְאֶת-הַבְּקָר וְהַגְּמְלִים
לִשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹת:

“Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps.”

A verse full of action. Jacob has *yirah*. He is afraid and then before diving into action, the text adds another emotional layer.

Vayetzer lo. Linguistically linked to the word *Mitzrayim*, the narrow straits we'll later learn about in Egypt, Yaakov is distressed and feeling anxiety.

Wouldn't it have sufficed to have just described him as fearful?
We'd get it. After all, his brother, last they talked, wanted to kill him.
What exactly is being added here when the Torah tells us that Jacob
is wracked with worry?

In first to help us unpack the emotional side is Rabbi Shmuel
Borenztein, the 2nd Rebbe of Sochatchov, part of the Kotzker
chasidic dynasty. He is known as the Shem Mishmuel, the name of
the posthumous collection of his teachings.

He compares this moment to the moment at the sea when the
Egyptians were approaching the fleeing Israelites and he notes that
they too felt *yirah*. The same emotions felt here were felt there too
but what fear did they have in that moment? After all, they had
already seen the Egyptians struck down with God's wonders.

In that case, he notes the Egyptians approached as Rashi argues “as one person, with one heart.” In other words, they were perceived by the Israelites as wholly united in their desire to destroy the Israelites because the evil inclination, the desire to hate the other, is like branches of a tree that spreads dangerously.

So too here the Shem Mishmuel argues, it doesn't say 400 men were with him but rather 400 *ish*, singular, were with him. The unity that we perceived in our Egyptian enemies was the same one Yaakov perceived in Esav's retinue.

This resonates to our current time. There is perceived unity among those that wish to harm us. Whether it's the Black Hebrew Israelites or the Nick Fuenteses of the world, across the spectrum there seems to be a coming together of those that don't like Jews very much. Yaakov had *yirah* and *meitzar*. We too, *b'nei yisrael*, the spiritual descendants of Yaakov have the same.

And so we wonder how to respond. How do we face this fear and anxiety? We too can turn back to Yaakov to see how he responded. As I noted above, the text tells us he divides his party into two camps, which is seen on the *pshat* level as a strategic move to diminish collateral damage. In case Esav comes to strike one camp, one other camp will remain.

As I have discussed before, the chasidic masters see the surface level read and transform them into something more spiritual and allegorical. This one I am about to share does this **and** provides practical wisdom. The Noam Elimelch of Lizhensk argues that when Jacob splits the camps, he's speaking about us as individuals. He divides himself and his group into thoughts and speech. I am going to take rabbinic license and add deeds to speech.

The thought part is that he first helps the people with him to confess. Admit that you're afraid. Start there. Get the words out. We're all afraid. Then and now. Transform those internal thoughts and that narrowness that might be plaguing you into something external that can be seen by others. Your loneliness will feel less isolating.

Then, once you've done that, use those thoughts for prayer. Seek out a higher power as Yaakov does. Specifically noting that he cries out to God saying "you asked me come here and have shown me kindness and I did it and I crossed this river בְּמִקְלִי, with my staff," the Noam Elimelech says that that word, is actually hinting to us the power of the voice, *kol*. Not only should we admit to our feelings but we can also use our voices to pour our thoughts out to God.

Even if you're not operating from the theological viewpoint that prayer is directly efficacious in that way, think about it as a crying out to others for help. Seek out allies. Talk to your friends not in the Jewish community about what's going on. Write op-eds. Speak out about this. Don't be silent because, as the Noam Elimelech notes, "with speech, I can fight and get strengthened."

So we've used our thoughts to admit to our feelings of fear and our voices to pray. Now we come to the second half of the camp division which involves speech and action. The Noam Elimelech speaks about this through the lens of mitzvot. For him, mitzvot are born from our thoughts and they come in the form of our speech via the blessings we make when doing mitzvot.

But what he doesn't say that I want to add is that *mitzvot* are all about action. For us in the situation we find ourselves, I think this means living unabashedly Jewish. Being outwardly proud of being Jewish is something I struggle with and maybe you do too.

Especially in this current climate, it can feel a little bit scary to be publicly Jewish, but I think that's part of what the Noam Elimelech is positing. **Specifically** when you are fearful, lean into your acts of Judaism. Through that, we may allay some of our fears.

We're coming up on the perfect time of year for this.

Chanukah, whose main act is publicizing the mitzvah, is a great chance to practice what we're preaching here today. If you normally light your menorah on the inside of your house, find a ledge or a public facing space to show it to the world. And if you're feeling really audacious, go to Amazon and order some of those gigantic chanukah inflatables and put some in your lawn. They'll probably get here in time!

Even if it's not chanukah, find another way to be outwardly proud of your Judaism. Invite a non-Jewish friend from school to your house for Shabbat dinner. Show them how joyful and inclusive we are. Find a volunteer opportunity and wear your kippah or don some Jewishly themed clothes so that people can see us for who we are.

Our tradition tells us that these forces will always be there. Our parsha shows us that we are so similar to Jacob. It's ok to be afraid but we shouldn't fully fall prey to that fear. We can actually respond to it in the same way Jacob does. Let's all find those thoughts, voice them, and turn words into action to live as *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people that live proudly.

Shabbat Shalom,

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