

Temple Shalom

Prayer

- Our Services
- Our Temple
- Music
- Calendar

Learning

- Religious Education
- Adult Education
- Weekly Torah Portion
- Sermons & Writings
- Shofar Archives

Community

- About Us
- Clergy & Leadership
- Groups
(Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Renaissance)
- Judaica Gift Shop
- Life Cycle
- Social Action
- New Membership Info
- Email Suggestions
- Contact & Directions

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Temple Shalom

*A Reform Jewish Congregation
Chevy Chase, Maryland*

All in the Family

by Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

A story, from Jewish tradition. Once upon a time, there lived two brothers, who shared a field, whose houses were on opposite ends of the field. One brother was a bachelor, who lived alone. The other was married, with many children. By day the siblings worked together, and they shared and divided the crops of the field equally. No one called them socialists for doing so, and they knew that they were in it together. Over the course of time, each sibling felt for the other. The bachelor was worried that the family man had all those extra mouths to feed, and needed extra food. And the married brother was worried that his single sibling lived alone, with no one to help him, so he needed the extra income. And so it happened that in the dark of the night each of them would fill their arms with sheaves of produce and traipse off to the other's house, and in the morning each would be astonished to discover that their own supplies had not diminished. This went on for several days, until finally, the two encountered one another on one of their nocturnal journeys. And at that point, as they looked at each other and realized what was going on, suddenly they heard a Voice from Heaven decree... that on such a site, filled with love and sacrifice, of caring for one another, this would be the site upon which would one day be built... the Holy Temple.

A variant, a bit of a more modern midrash. One upon a time, there lived two brothers, who shared a field, and whose houses were on opposite ends of the field. One was a bachelor, and the other was married. They worked together by day, and divided their crops equally. They knew that each one did his share; they each did their part of the farming alone. Over the course of time, each sibling felt sorry for himself. I have a family, thought the married man, with many more mouths to feed. I am alone, thought the bachelor, with no one to help me. And so in the dark of the night, each of them would go out empty handed, and grab some of the sheaves from the other's house. In the morning each would be astonished to find that their own supplies had not

increased, until the two finally encountered one another on one of their nocturnal journeys. And at that point they heard a Voice from Heaven decree that on such a site... this would be the site upon which would one day be built... the Knesset. The Israeli parliament.

Now, I have, as have all of you, met many politicians in my life, American and Israeli and those from other countries as well. And we should remember, we who live in or near this nation's capital, even in an election year, that the vast majority of politicians on all sides of important issues are dedicated public servants who give up a great deal to enter this line of work, and who probably resemble the first story more than the second. Inundated by attack ads, blatant distortions and endless robo-calls, however, it just doesn't...feel that way anymore.

We are... here for each other. And we are also... always looking out... for our own satisfaction. Perhaps fulfillment is found... in a balance between the two.

Back to the opening story. We heard, this morning, what might be the Scriptural origin of that first version of the story: the sacrifice offered by the first Jew, by Abraham, the story of the binding of Isaac. For it is there, our tradition tells us, right there, on top of that mountain, in that place... the slab of rock which became the chief cornerstone, that field at the summit became the site... of the Jerusalem Temple. Moriah became Zion.

But there are two sites strongly associated with our ancestor Abraham. Jerusalem, the Temple mount, the remnant left to us which we call the Kotel. An ancient wall in a central square in the capital city of a modern country. That is the better known of the two sites. But turn to the next page, roll the scroll and we encounter Abraham going back home, getting ready to tell his wife what he has done.

Vey is mir! Can you imagine such a conversation! But... there is no going home from such an act. Some say Sarah had a heart attack when she heard even a rumor of the event, others that she fell off a roof. All we know for sure is that the family is never together again. Abraham followed the Voice of Heaven, his calling, his career, was ready to take a knife to family ties, sacrifice today for the sake of tomorrow. And Sarah dies. Abraham's first act, on returning home, is to buy a burial plot. Call the funeral home. Tell his friends. Set up for shivah. Abraham had been talking to God. Now he needs to find a rabbi.

The place he purchased was a cave off a field in a city full of strangers. That site, as contested as the first one... that site I stood as for the first time in my life this past summer.

En route to Chevron, Ezra Korman, Associate Director of Keshet, a Center for Educational Tourism in Israel, prepared us for what we would encounter in a deeply divided city. The first person we

would meet, he explained, was a member of Sh'virat HaShtikah, Breaking the Silence. Breaking the Silence is an organization of former IDF soldiers whose mission is to let the Israeli public know about the reality of life in the Occupied Territories, in particular, what kind of actions are taken, what is seen as needed, to maintain an occupation. Without all its members coming from one side of the political spectrum, nevertheless the group has been labeled, and is perceived, as a "left wing soldier's protest organization." In the interest of full-disclosure, Ezra Korman then told us that the spokesperson we were about to meet... is his nephew.

And then he said: "Just so you know: my daughter is 22. She's married. She has three children. And she lives on a hilltop, not too far from here." The hilltop settlers are occupants of illegal outposts with no official infrastructure. They were built alone, as it were, without permits or permission. [See what happens when you do things without the government! You're either a hero or a villain, in someone's story!] Ezra went on: "My nephew and my daughter. My own politics," he said, "are somewhere in between."

Well, somewhere in between *those two* leaves a lot of room! That's a pretty big gap. But what I was thinking was not about the substance. It was this: **Welcome to Israel, where "All in the Family" really means something. Law and morality, secrecy and transparency, visions and values, life and death, war and peace, left and right, all there, right there...at the table where cousins break bread.**

My friends, despite a chasm of cultural miscues and environmental misunderstandings between American Jews and the reality of Israel, despite a continental drift growing wider with every passing year, I still believe that the imagined arguments at that Israeli dinner table...are the essential core questions of Judaism as a whole.

When we sense, on a trip to Israel or even a discussion about it, a certain level of intensity, I think it is not just about the fact that we are travelers trying to get the most out of a brief visit – I believe it is an accurate reflection of a different reality. **It is the elevation of the mundane, the sense that ordinary conversations and everyday events really matter. To cite just some of the questions: what is the place of an individual, a voice of conscience and protest, versus communal consensus, an imagined manifest destiny, historical consciousness and sense of purpose? The anthem may be called "Hatikvah, The Hope," but what happens when hope fades, when the notion of conflict resolution drops out of political parlance, replaced by references to conflict management? Where do we stand in our evaluation of war and peace, the dangers faced, the risks one might take? And always, always, it comes down to the question of the direction of our lives, and our relationship with our**

**community. Are we coming together, or are we pulling apart?
Where are we headed, and which way, and how, and why?
With such divergent understandings of past and present,
what now, and what's next?**

I opened today with two twists on the same tale. In a book about to come out, Yossi Klein HaLevi will tell the story of Israel through what he calls two failed utopian revolutions which are not often cited in the same breath: the kibbutz experiment, and the settler movement. And he is going to tell this story, I think, in a particularly powerful way.

Many of you know the tale of the Jewish liberation of the site we opened with today, the place of Abraham's offering, the Kotel, the Western Wall. You may remember, you may have heard the broadcast, or read about, Motta Gur and a unit of paratrooper reserves racing through the Old City, until words no one expected rang out over the radio: "Har HaBayit B'yadeinu; the Temple Mount is in our hands!"

What HaLevi noticed is that six years later it was the same seven guys, the same Unit, Unit 55, who were with Ariel Sharon when he breached Egyptian lines and crossed the Suez Canal, turning the tide of the Yom Kippur War. The same men are right there for the iconic image, the mythic moment of both wars.

And who are these seven guys? It turns out that four of them, including Meir Ariel and Avital Gever, were in the peace camp, founders of Shalom Achshav, Peace Now. And the other three, including Chanan Porat... went on to play prominent roles on the right, establishing the very first post-1967 settlement, founders of the ideological settler's group Gush Emunim. The same guys... The same seven... Once there were two brothers, who lived on opposite sides of a field...

The kibbutzim and the settlers. Brothers on opposite sides. But they had more in common than commonly assumed. Both were collectivist, messianic movements – one secular and socialist, the other mystical and nationalist. Neither were ever majority movements; both saw themselves as cutting edge, avant-garde life-affirming enterprises on a mission to transform the Jewish people. There is more to tell of this tale than we have time for here, but it is also the case that both of these movements, in their own way, have failed. And when an all-encompassing messianic movement fails, it leaves a vacuum in its wake. There is soul-searching, doubt, emptiness and uncertainty.

In its own way, and until the events in Egypt and Libya of this past week, this was an unexpectedly quiet summer. Just a year ago Wall Street shook, Arab squares filled... and tents sprang up on the streets of Israel. Something is going on – as we can see something is going on under the surface still, something bigger than one people or place, but not yet defined, vague and amorphous still.

HaLevi speculates, and I wonder as well, about what is coming next. **It seems to me that we struggle with the same question – what is the role of the community, and what is the place of the person? Is the core element of human experience social, connected, relational – or personal, independent, individual?** Freedom of expression, being able to be who we are, do what we want, act without the interference of others... these are words coming out clearly in our own campaigns, as well as in the issue of the role of women, the rights of minorities, the creation of a place for self-expression and individual differences. At the same time, we remember that we have responsibilities to one another, that a culture can express itself collectively, that a society is more than just an amalgam of separate selves. Will we continue a quest for personal self-fulfillment; intensify individualism and a sense of the sovereign self? Or will we reclaim a vision of meaning and motivation rooted in service, connection and community? Can we pull off...doing both? Which kind of sibling will we be?

I don't know where the wheat will wind up, how it will be piled and counted in the end. But I do know we will continue to explore these issues. They play out close to home, and they play out in a homeland far away.

While there are ongoing local echoes in everything I have raised this morning, I want to share with you now a taste of what we, as a congregation, will offer in terms of connections to Israel, invitations and opportunities in the days to come:

- For a second cycle, beginning this October, we will be offering the Shalom Hartman Institute's Engaging Israel experience, this time condensed in a more manageable nine-week time-frame instead of stretching out over the entire year. This is the highest quality material I have ever worked with in teaching adults; I am... energized and excited about offering this course again, and I hope to share that excitement with, well, many of you, not just a few, on Tuesday evenings this fall.
- On Wednesday, October 17, we are co-hosting, with Temple Sinai, one of the most important figures in the Reform Jewish world – Rabbi Miri Gold, an American-born Reform rabbi in Israel who recently won a court case and should, soon, be the first Reform rabbi ever to receive a salary from the Israeli government, in a manner similar to the way Orthodox municipal rabbis are paid in Israel. And she's a she, which makes it even more important!
- On Thursday, December 13, on the seventh night of Chanukah, we are working with Am Kollel to sponsor a Freedom Concert, promoting human rights for Israelis and Palestinians, and featuring the Israeli group Seeds of Sun.
- On Thursday, December 20, we are hosting the Israeli Arab scholar Majid Al-Haj, who will speak about overlapping identities

of Arabs in Israel, caught between peace and conflict.

- Finally, if there is enough interest, and if other things work out to make this possible, we will be returning to Israel as a congregation this coming summer. That trip would take place during the last two weeks of July. I love nothing more... in my whole life experience, I think there is almost nothing that I think is more important... than taking people to Israel for the first time. Depending on who responds, however, we could frame this trip as an Israel 201 experience, if there are those of you who want to return, yet do something new. As was said in a speech I heard recently, "it's about you!" Please let me know if you are interested in such a trip.

- In addition to the specific items I just mentioned, I am also hoping to continue to open up important issues relating to Israel through non-conventional means, exploration with music and movies, poetry and culture. If you are interested in helping develop these opportunities in our community, please let me know this as well.

Here, and there. Us and them. We and me. As I have said, as strongly as I could convey this morning: I believe that what emerges out of an exploration of the Middle East... is central to who we are, that the questions cutting at the edge of Israeli society are really the front-line agenda... for almost all contemporary Jewish conversation. **Just look at the echo, now, between forces centrifugal and centripetal, between that which is pulling us together, and that which is tearing us apart, issues always at the heart of Israeli life, coming out now, in domestic discourse, courtesy of an American election near you!**

Another twist, on an opening tale: in preparing my remarks for this morning, I did some research on the Story of the Two Brothers. The story is almost always referred to as "old" or "ancient." It is often cited as coming from the Talmud. But it is not in the Talmud. It is referred to as a Midrash, a piece of rabbinic legend or lore. It is not from the classical midrashim, either. Turns out... that the first reference anyone can find to Jews using this story comes from a collection published in 1851. Further digging turned up an earlier source. The story appears in the writings of an Alphonse de Lamartine, a French author with affection for the Bible. He claims to have heard it while travelling in the Holy Land in 1832. And he heard it, he said... from an Arab peasant! One writer now calls this tale... a Palestinian Midrash.

What a delicious irony! Perhaps even the story we tell about the contested site we claim as the center of our spiritual "space" – a story which turns on a selfless act of love and sharing, of thinking about the needs of others —even the story itself... is shared!

Maybe... maybe all in the family... maybe cousins can extend even further than we thought. And maybe... maybe it is true, as the first tale portrays... maybe we do all have a piece... of each other's puzzle.

Shanah Tovah

