

Sources of Strength

This week, our hearts were broken by the incredible, horrific murder by Palestinian terrorists of five people in the Har Nof neighborhood in Jerusalem. Four of those murdered were rabbis, who were praying, wrapped in Tallit and Tefillin. For those familiar with the early morning devotional in Traditional Jewish ritual practice, it is the picture of calm, reflective, peaceful communion with the Divine. The violence against innocent, God-fearing teachers, husbands and fathers is shocking. The wonder of this trauma is how – in a location of such trauma and aggression – can we still be stunned by these acts of violence, but lo and behold, here we are, aghast, again. The creativity of depravity is truly astounding.

We also mourn the death of the Druze police guard who ran into the firefight with the terrorists and sacrificed his life to save innocent Jews. His personal sacrifice – and the sacrifice his family has made, he left a 4 month old baby without a father – is breathtakingly holy. We must not see these events only through the darkened lenses of despair – though that may be how we naturally feel; goodness shines bright and it is our task to magnify that light.

As always, in times of deep sorrow and trauma, we turn to our tradition to find a language and a value set to try to find *chizuk*, strength and support. In our Torah portion this week, Toldot, Yitzchak is living in Canaan and, like his father, Abraham, Isaac faces the test of a famine. Isaac knew the story of his father's descent into Egypt during that famine for the sake of salvation. And he too, so it seems from the text, was preparing to make the journey to Egypt. However, God tells Isaac "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I will inform you." (Gen 26:1-2)

Rashi explains that Isaac couldn't go to Egypt; he was an *Olah Temimah*, a perfect burnt offering. Isaac was a living sacrifice. He allowed his father to nearly offer him to God. And the Torah informs us in Leviticus, the book of the Priests that the burnt offering must stay on the altar until it is completely consumed. Isaac, in this metaphor, is an offering that must stay atop the altar, in Israel, until he finishes his life's mission – the continuity of the family and the birth of a nation. (See Rashi, *ibid*)

But the practical question arises: how will Isaac and his family – a wife and twin sons - and his livestock and servants survive? Egypt was nourished by the fertility of the Nile. They did not suffer the same privation that the people of the Middle East suffered. Where did Isaac find sustenance for survival in the face of terrible existential threats?

He dug wells. He dug wells that his father had dug, but had been covered over and he dug new wells. (ibid, 26:12-23) Avraham faced the famine of Canaan by fleeing from it; Isaac faced the famine by finding life beneath it. These two forefathers serve as models for facing the impossible and horrific. Sometimes, we will need to change our perspective. 'Change your location, change your luck,' says the Talmud. At other times, we will have to look inside, look deeper and there we will find the wisdom we need to survive. In Isaac's example, he dug wells that his father had dug before him and he also dug wells that were untapped springs of water. For the inner-seeker, wisdom and truth will be found in the well-worn paths of our ancestors, our parents and our community. And at other times, resilience will be found from a new well and life will be revived with our own words.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach; May this Shabbat bring consolation to the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and to all those facing despair.

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