

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Bechukotai

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

The Fax of Life ת"סב

24 Iyar, 5784

June 1, 2024

GOOD MORNING! In a few short weeks we will be celebrating the holiday of *Shavuot*, which commemorates the newly minted Jewish nation receiving the Torah from the Almighty on Mount Sinai.

This fact – that the Jewish people received the Torah on Mount Sinai – is something that is accepted by the vast majority of all religious people on earth. Both Christianity and Islam incorporate what is known as the “Sinaitic Event” in the history and narrative of their own religious doctrine. This commonality of origin is the reason that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are known as the Abrahamic religions.

The sages explain that the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people took place under very unique circumstances. We find in the Torah regarding the Israelites arriving at Mount Sinai:

“They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived at the Wilderness, and they encamped in the Wilderness. Israel encamped opposite the mountain” (Exodus 19:2).

The great medieval Biblical commentator Rashi points out that the verse begins with the plural (“they”) and ends with a reference to the people in the singular (“Israel”). Rashi explains the discrepancy by saying that they camped unified as a single entity: **“as one man, with one heart.”**

We find a fascinatingly similar contrasting language regarding the Egyptians when they confronted the Jewish people at the Red Sea. “The Egyptians (plural) chased after them, and overtook them by the sea [...]. The Israelites lifted their eyes and behold! Egypt (singular) was traveling furiously after them [...]” (*Exodus 14:9-10*). On this verse Rashi comments: **“with one heart, as one man.”** The change from plural to singular refers to the fact that they were singularly united in the pursuit of the Jewish people.

The commentators ask why it is that regarding the unity of the Egyptians the sages termed it **“with one heart, as one man,”** yet regarding the unity of the Israelites it says **“as one man, with one heart”**?

They answer that regarding the Egyptians it was the singular purpose of chasing down their Jewish slaves that created the unity among them. Thus, it begins with “heart” (i.e. their purpose) and ends with their unity “as one man.” But in the case of the Jewish people it was their bond of brotherhood that brought them together and unified them “as one man” and then, together, they found a unifying purpose (i.e. to receive the Torah) “with one heart.”

It was this very unique circumstance, that of a unity of brotherhood, in which the Jewish people received the Torah from the Almighty. This is also why they were camped together peacefully at Mount Sinai; they saw themselves as a one big family. When it comes to personal space, people who view themselves as family are apt to make accommodations for one another; in fact, they often very much enjoy being thrown together. One doesn't feel as if his personal space is encroached upon if the person encroaching it is an extension of himself. (Consider the difference between sitting on a plane cramped between two strangers or sitting between two family members. It is a vastly different experience.)

In a similar vein, we find a story in which Moses, while still in Egypt and some sixty years before the Exodus, is deeply disturbed by the lack of unity amongst his brethren. *“Moses went out the next day and saw two Hebrews fighting. He demanded of the one that was in the wrong, ‘Why are you beating your brother?’”*

There are many layers to this incident, but at its most elemental it's clear that Moses is deeply disturbed by the fact that the Jewish people were being beaten and enslaved by the Egyptians and yet here they were, fighting viciously with one another. In fact, one of the combatants replies to Moses that he should mind his own business, and then adds a veiled threat of “snitching” on him to the Egyptian authorities for an incident in which Moses killed an Egyptian in defense of a fellow Jew (he later makes good on his threat and Moses is forced to flee Egypt). According to our sages, it was this incident of Jewish disunity that clarified for Moses why the Jews were still enslaved in Egypt.

Thankfully, the protests on college campuses, which captured the focus of the media for several months, have mostly subsided. The hatred, vitriolic rhetoric, and calls for the elimination of the State of Israel by the vast majority of those who participated in those protests, were almost to be expected. After all, antisemitism is nothing new. No one should be surprised that very few of them even knew what they were chanting – it wasn't a just cause, it was simply manifest hatred of Jews.

While it was sad and disturbing to see, I was not particularly worried. History has shown that they will likely soon join the ranks of all the other antisemites since the beginning of time, and that they will surely end up with the rest of them in the ash heap of history. They will soon be forgotten, barely registering as a blip in the flow and narrative of humankind.

Nevertheless, what disturbed me the most were the images of those of Jewish birth who turned their backs on their brethren and supported, marched, and aligned themselves with those calling for the destruction of their own people. It is simply unfathomable to me to be able to turn one's back on one's own family. I have written previously, several times, that I believe that the horrors of October 7th were a direct result of the alarming disunity of the Jewish people over the last several years. The fact that there were some Jewish people who even funded some of these protesters is, in my mind, both incomprehensible and unforgivable.

Jews who participated alongside the enemies of the Jewish people are what I consider a human equivalent of a typo – they are embarrassing, take away from the perfection of the body of work, and need to be deleted. This is the best way I can describe the feeling of nausea induced by seeing Jews dressed in traditional Jewish attire supporting the Jew-haters in Iran and the protesters in New York. The betrayal of those Jews who side with the enemies of their own people reminds me of something that we can all learn from the mafia.

There is little positive to say when it comes to the mafia. These criminal organizations built on the most heinous of illegal activities and immoral practices, are wholly reprehensible. But they did get one thing right. They organized themselves as “families” – whether by familial blood or just criminal association – they see themselves as connected and bound to one another, and absolutely unified against the world.

Their concept of “family” has many worthy connotations. They unreservedly support one another (even when they don’t necessarily agree), and they settle their disputes within their respective families. This is perhaps best exemplified by a line from the award-winning movie *The Godfather Part II* when a character angrily tells his older brother; “YOU NEVER TAKE SIDES AGAINST THE FAMILY!”

As Jews, we have strong and often differing opinions – and we frequently make our displeasure known. A joke is told of a Jewish sailor who was shipwrecked on an island for ten years. Upon being discovered, he gave his rescuers a tour of the island. He showed them how he built a cozy home and how he farmed the land. He then showed them the two synagogues that he’d built. They looked at him and asked, “You’re here alone, why did you need TWO synagogues?” He replied, “That’s the synagogue where I pray and the other one I wouldn’t dare step inside!”

The joke is supposed to reflect the disputatious nature of Jews – you often cannot put two in the same room without expecting an argument, and sometimes you can’t even put one alone without resulting in the same argument. Jews may argue with each other but, in the end, there is a love for one another.

This past yom ha’atzmaut – Israel’s celebration of Independence Day – I read a remarkable piece entitled *A Chareidi Jew Says Thank You to the State of Israel* written by a friend of mine, Rabbi Avrohom Edelstein a self-described *Chareidi* or “ultra-Orthodox” Jew. I have included parts of it because I found them heartwarming, hopeful, and entirely relevant to this conversation.

“Once upon a time there were raging debates amongst the sages as to the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Three major schools of thought emerged. On the one side was Rav Avraham Isaac Kook and on the other side was the Satmer Rebbe. All the other great rabbis were in the middle. Rav Kook held that the State was the beginning of the ‘final redemption.’ The Satmer Rebbe held that the State was the work of Satan. The rest of the Sages, while holding back on specific ideological positions, stated that, as a practical matter, if the State will support the growth and development of Torah and Torah-keeping communities, they would be in favor of the State. That’s it, in simple terms.

“But all of that is history. There is a State. The sole *Chareidi* representative at the time, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levine of the Agudath Yisroel, was a part of the founding of that State, signing the Declaration of Independence. We are after the fact. We cannot drive on a road, flip a light switch, or open a faucet without benefiting from that State. When we leave to visit relatives in America or England, we do so on Israeli passports through an airport that was a government project.

“It may be controversial to say this right now, but the State remains the largest supporter of Torah of any body or individual in the world and probably the largest ever. The Torah community in Israel has thrived. We *Chareidim* live as a part of a larger community – the entire State and all of its citizens. This community has benefited from thousands, if not tens of thousands, of miracles. The miracles reign down on our heads far more prominently than the missiles do. The collective holiness of the Jewish people is apparently worthy of God’s repeated and continual intervention to protect those living here.

“You don’t have to fly the Israeli flag on your car to be grateful. You don’t have to sing the *HaTikva* anthem to deeply appreciate the sacrifices our soldiers made and continue to make risking their lives for all of us. You don’t have to qualify your gratitude with all the multiple critiques you could make on every aspect of the government, on every sector, on the annoying aspects of Israeli culture.

“And so, I thank you Hashem Almighty, for this wonderful gift. Thank you to all of you, dead and alive, who sacrificed for the sake of building up this land; thank you to all of you who serve all of us faithfully, every day – in government offices, hospitals, and everywhere else. Thank you, all you wonderful people – every single one of you – for agreeing to take me in and to contribute to this most privileged and amazing experience. Thank you without qualifications, with no hesitations, and with no reservations.”

TORAH PORTION: Bechukotai, Leviticus 26:3 - 27:34

🕯️ This week’s portion begins with the multitude of blessings you will receive for keeping the commandments of the Torah (truly worth reading!). It also contains the *tochachah*, words of admonition: “If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments [...]” There are seven series of seven punishments each. Understand that God does not punish for punishment’s sake; He wants to get our attention so that we will introspect, recognize our errors, and correct our ways. God does not wish to destroy us or annul His covenant with us. He wants us to know that there are consequences for our every action. He also wants to get our attention so that we do not stray so far away that we assimilate and disappear as a nation. I highly recommend reading *Leviticus* 26:14 - 45 and *Deuteronomy* 28.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 7:04 Miami 7:49 Cape Town 5:27 Guatemala 6:09 Hong Kong 6:46 Honolulu 6:51
🕯️ Jo’Burg 5:05 LA 7:41 London 8:52 Melbourne 4:51 Mexico 6:53 Moscow 8:43 New York 8:02 Singapore 6:50 Toronto 8:34

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Society is unity in diversity. — George Herbert Mead

Dedicated in Loving Memory of
Ella Riley Adler OBM, Chana bat Matityahu



Shabbat Shalom,
Yitzchak Zweig
Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

Honor a Loved One! Dedicate an edition of the Shabbat Shalom Fax **ShabbatShalom.org** (IRS# 65-0389241)

- Friend of the Fax \$54 Benefactor \$118 Patron \$252 Fax Dedication \$360 Partner \$1,000
Shabbat Shalom Fax ● PO Box 402666 ● Miami Beach, FL 33140

To be removed: Send the name & fax number to: rabbizweig@shabbatshalom.org — or fax: +1 786-977-5811