

Parshat Toledot
“A Tallit Stained With Tears”
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17,934

That is the number of times I have put on a tallit since the first time I put one on at my Bar Mitzvah some 49 years ago. As you can imagine, having done something 17,934 times – I am comfortable in my tallit. What could be more normal? What could be more routine? I wake up every morning, I brush my teeth, I get dressed – I put on my tallit.

I imagine that is what Rabbi Moshe Twersky, Aryeh Kupinsky, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Goldberg and Rabbi Kalman Levine must have been thinking Tuesday morning as they put on their tallit in a small shul in a suburb of Jerusalem – what could be more normal? What could be more routine? Zidan Saif was the Israeli policeman who rushed in to save them when the shooting started. He was also murdered. He hadn't put on a tallit that morning – he was an Israeli Druze, but I suspect he had his routines as well – and last Tuesday probably began as just another day for him as well.

None of those innocent souls who were killed had any idea their lives were about to end in a bloody massacre, in an act of terror and hatred and violence that left us with images that will forever be seared into our brains. A picture of a bloodied siddur; a picture of an arm wrapped in tefillin severed from the body it had been attached to; a tallit, stained with a righteous man's innocent blood. *Eleh Ezkerah V'ashpach et nafshi* - “These I recall and pour my heart out...” The litany of woes that we recite at the Eleh Ezkerah, the Martyrology Service on Yom Kippur has a new chapter of Jewish destruction and defeat from the land that was supposed to be our salvation and redemption.

I wrap myself in my tallit this morning and it no longer feels routine. After 17,934 times – I feel its warmth, I feel its holiness, but I also feel so sad and I feel angry. Sad that those holy souls in Jerusalem who were murdered on Tuesday can no longer feel what I feel – angry that it was so senseless, a product of blind hatred. I am angry with those who perpetrated such an act, I am angry with those who celebrate it and I am angry with a world that finds words of condemnation for everything and anything but Jewish blood. CNN reports to the world the tragic death of 4 Israelis and 2 Palestinians as if there was no difference between the murdered and their murderers. Can you imagine if CNN would have reported the events of 9/11 by saying 3,000 Americans and 11 Saudis were killed today... A CBS reporter identifies the synagogue as located in a “contested area” – when it is in a suburb of Jerusalem – as if all Israel is now of questionable status in the minds of too many. The BBC leads their reporting of the event citing that Israeli police shot and killed two Palestinians before mentioning that they were shot and killed in the act of murdering innocent Israelis davening in a synagogue.

Let me begin by telling you what I do not want to speak about today. I do not want to speak about the politics of this situation – you can read more and better analysis of what is going on from people who know far more than I do. I do not wish to speak about the possibility that a third intifada is beginning – I am not a prophet and I have little insight into what will happen tomorrow or the day after.

No - I want to take just a few minutes and speak to you my Jews, my precious, wonderful Jews who are here today and I want to make a plea for how we should process this event, how we should react to a world that seems to be reacting so poorly to us. There is so much over which we have so little control but the one thing we do control is our own reactions, our own feelings, our own choices – and it is that I wish to address today.

In today's Torah reading, *Parshat Toldot*, we read of the struggle between Jacob and Esau. The reading for this morning told of the birth of twin children to our patriarch and matriarch Isaac and Rebekkah. Jacob and Esau were adversaries from birth - in fact even before birth as we are told that they were battling even in their mother's womb. As the story unfolds Jacob becomes the good guy and Esau becomes the bad guy. The future of the Jewish people will be from the children of Jacob, not Esau. While Jacob is destined to become the father of Israel, Esau is destined to be the first in a long line of people throughout Jewish history who were described as *sonei yisrael* – those who hate Israel. If Esau was the first *hater of Israel* – and he was literally a *sonei yisrael* - a hater of his brother Israel - which Jacob changed his name to – if Esau was the first – he was only the first, as he became the father of a long line of generations of *sonei yisrael* – Israel haters, Esau's descendants, who in the rabbinic imagination inherited his passion and his hatred for Jews and all things Jewish. It may have begun thousands of years ago and in today's Parasha – but it is alive and well in 2014 as we saw this past Tuesday in a small synagogue in Har Nof, Jerusalem. If we had more time we could study why this split happened between Jacob and his brother. The bible itself is not all that clear on the matter, but there is no doubt that Esau became one of the most despised characters in all of biblical literature - just as Jacob, his brother, became one of its most beloved. In the long history of our people, no Jew has ever been named for Esau even though he is the son of our patriarch Isaac! Even Ishmael, the child of Abraham, and Hagar and who was described in the Torah as a “wild man” finds his name perpetuated by some Talmudic sages. Not so Esau.

Why? I would suggest to you - one verse that might shed some light on why Esau was destined to become the symbol of all things villainous in Jewish tradition. The torah portion for this week contains a simple but dramatic account of the sale of Esau's birthright to Jacob. The exact words in the Torah (Genesis 25:34) *Vayivez Eysav et-hab'horah* - And Esau despised his birthright...” The rabbis read this to imply that Esau committed a terrible sin and they emphasized the gravity of that sin. Esau had contempt for his birthright and it is this contempt - this fundamental attitude of hatred - that made him unworthy to be the heir to Abraham and Isaac. Esau grew to be a man driven by hatred and motivated by contempt. Murder was his weapon and hatred was his passion. My friends, in this humble interpretation I believe we may have stumbled on the secret to Jewish survival and one of the most important insights our sacred torah has to teach us.

My precious, fellow Jews, I would suggest to you that every nation, every people has their moment when they must choose between Jacob and Esau; to choose whether they are going to descendants of Jacob or Esau, whether theirs is going to be a legacy of hatred or love. We made our choice - we are *B'nai Yaakov* - we are the descendants of Jacob and our history speaks for itself. But it is a choice that has to be made in every generation – by every single person at some point in their life – and I worry that due to the anger and the frustration and the injustice of it all that we are in danger of making the wrong choice -- and that is why I speak to you today.

I read the newspapers and I see how our enemies have made their choice. How time and time again they chose Esau over Jacob –blind hatred, self-defeating, self-destructive hatred over anything remotely positive and constructive.

Hamas, Hizbollah, Isis, Al Quaida, Khamenei, Erdowan, Al Nusra, Bin Laden - these are all different ways to pronounce Esau. Look, the French know their wine, the Italians know their beautiful women, we Jews know how to spot an enemy – from Pharaoh to Haman, from Hadrian to Torquemada to Adolf Hitler – from Stalin to Ahmedinijad – there is no people on the face of this earth who has developed a better pedigree in identifying hatred than we Jews. We chose the path of Jacob but we have watched for thousands of years those who chose the path of Esau, and we know hate when we see it.

Rational people tell us we are overreacting by what we see happening on America's college campuses. Sensible people tell us that Europe is not anti-Semitic they are merely anti-Israel. Reasonable people try and tell us that if Israel just gives back a little more land – peace and love will fill the Middle East. Look – if a Frenchman tells you this wine is bad – send it back And if a Jew tells you this is anti-Semitic – believe him.

There is a video bouncing around the internet - -many of you have probably seen it, it show a student standing in the middle of the campus at UC Berkley waving the ISIS Flag – shouting how ISIS is misunderstood and wants peace with the world. And as you watch the scene – students walk by – mostly undisturbed by this activity – a few even shout out encouraging words. Than the same student stands in the same place waving an Israeli flag shouting about how Israel is misunderstood and wants peace with the world – and he is ridiculed, cursed at, by almost everyone who passes by. How is this possible? How did this total inversion of logical thought come to be? How did they become the good guys and we become the enemy?

Esau, said the rabbis was a master of deceit, he presented himself as a friend; he tried to pass as a good guy.. And people fell for it - even his own father Isaac!! Our rabbis tell us that Esau would come home and his father would ask: "Where were you today?" And Esau would reply: "In the study hall, father." And Esau would ask his father halachik questions so as to appear to be pious. Rashi, the great Biblical commentator relates a midrash which tells us that Esau would rob and extort people while pretending to be honorable. In Rashi's words: "*Eysav haya nimshal l'hazir...*" Esau is to be compared to a pig..." why? There was a famous Yiddish expression that grew out of this Rashi - some of you may know it - it goes: "*Ehr veist zein hazer fessel*" Which means "he is showing his pig's hooves..." Now this requires a little explanation. A pig is unique in Jewish law. In order for an animal to be kosher it must meet two qualifications: it must have split hooves and chew its cud. It must have both in order to be kosher. That is why of all the non-kosher animals the pig is the most derided. It is unique in that it is the only animal that has one - split hooves - but not the other - it does not chew its cud. And according to this yiddish saying: "*Ehr veist zein hazer fessel*" "he is showing his pig's hooves..." The pig goes around trying to trick people into thinking that he is something that he is not - he shows people his hooves and tries to trick them into thinking he is kosher. It is the hypocrisy that is the most disgusting. That according to Rashi is what Esau tried to do. He tried to fool people into thinking he was a good son, when in fact he was a brutal murderer...that he was a man of peace, when in fact he was a man of war... that he was a friend of the Jewish people, when in fact, he was a vicious enemy. And the story continues in our own day.

Tom Friedman in a recent New York Times editorial spoke forcibly on this when he said that it

is time we stopped listening to what Arab leaders say to us in English and listen more carefully to what they are saying to their own people in Arabic. To us they promise peace and love, to their own people they speak only of hatred and destruction. I challenge you to find one speech by any Arab leader that lays out a vision for how they intend to educate their youth and nurture their talents and build a future of their people. Even the Palestinian leaders – listen, they will speak only of the land of Palestine – never of the people of Palestine. Jihad for them is to liberate the land – not the people. Hamas has made it clear – their goal is not the salvation of their own people but the destruction of their enemies. Poverty, martyrdom, destruction – as long as it delivers the death of their enemies – no price is too small to pay.

Until they turn from the ways of Esau and embrace the ways of Jacob - until they let go of their hatred - a hatred that is taught in their *madrassas* their schools and in their mosques and learned at their father's feet and their mother's breasts - until there are more articles and speeches written by Arab leaders that speak of a Palestinian life over a Palestinian land - of education rather than jihad - than we are doomed to the legacy of Esau - a legacy of hatred and destruction.

But you see, I have little influence over them. What worries me is you. There is another video – I shared it with my lunch study group this week – it was produced by an Israeli TV show. They went into a coffee shop at a gas station rest stop near Holon and in a Candid Camera set up they replaced the owner with an actor and had a customer, dressed as an Arab woman, ask for a coffee. The owner replied, "I don't sell to Arabs, go somewhere else!" And then they filmed the reaction of real customers who happened to be in the shop – would they ignore the plight of the Arab woman or would they come to her defense?

It was not a scientific sample – so too much should not be drawn from the results - but the results were fifty/fifty. Some just walked away – not my business. But I was heartened by the numbers who did speak up - everyday Israeli's who would not tolerate hatred towards Arabs as an acceptable part of the society they were building. "Look," one man said, "I am a rightist, I support right wing candidates and policies, but this is not how we treat people here in Israel. She is an innocent woman who wants a cup of coffee. I have Arab customers and I have Arab friends. I do not hate Arabs!" Another woman is so visibly upset that she buys a cup of coffee and then gives it to the Arab woman and refuses to take her money. She apologizes to the woman for the shopkeeper's bad behavior and walks out crying and shaking. When confronted by the filmmaker she can't stop crying. She says, "this is not my country, this is not what we should be."

I love that woman. I love that country – a country that has been the target of more hatred and injustice than any in the modern world – yet still struggles to maintain the voice and the vision of Jacob. We are surrounded by Esau –we must not become him.

And my counsel this morning extends to your personal life, as much as it does to world politics. There comes a moment, usually many moments, when we too have to choose how we will live our own lives. Our own lives are filled with injustice, unfairness, those who mistreat us and dismiss us. How do we react when life does not work out the way it should? The choice that each of us is called upon to make is the choice of Jacob over Esau – of love over hate – of possibility over resentment. How many of us know people whose lives are frozen by resentment, paralyzed by hatred, crippled by anger? How many of us know people who chose the way of Esau over the path of Jacob?

I wrap myself in my tallit this morning, and *my* tallit is stained as well – not by blood, but by my tears. I weep for the loss of innocent life. I weep for those who choose anger and hatred and the damage they do. I weep for the triumph of hatred in our world today.

On this Shabbat after the death of innocent Jews praying in a synagogue – we have come to this synagogue to pray and we join with Jews the world over who gather in synagogues like ours to pray in the voice of Jacob. We pray for peace, we pray that our enemies will make choices for their future that will be wiser than the choices they have made in the past. That they will learn to embrace a vision of Jacob over Esau, of peace over war, of hope over despair, of love over hate. And let us say: Amen!