

# **A Prayer for Annapolis:** **Forgiveness, Faith and Fortitude**

Parshat Vayeshev

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

I'm not a politician nor am I diplomat, so I'm not going to stand here this morning and tell you what I think Israel should or should not be doing in Annapolis these days or how America can help broker a lasting peace in the Middle East. It's not that I don't have a point of view. I do; it's just that my opinion is no more valid than yours. So if you don't mind, I'll just keep it to myself, thank you!

Besides I don't believe in being a back seat driver. The Union of Orthodox Congregations, the Zionist Organization of America, and the Conference of Presidents of Major Am. Jewish Organizations (a title I've always found to be somewhat arrogant) all seem to know what Ehud Olmert ought to be doing. Personally, I think the leaders of these organizations should all shut up (pardon my language) and stand back. Their opinions are also no more valid than ours. Besides, there's something chuzpadik about American Jews telling Israelis what they should or should not be doing or with whom they should or should not be talking. If Israel was important enough to the leaders of these organizations, they would be living there instead of offering opinions from the side lines!

Having gotten that off my chest, I'd like to spend a few minutes this morning talking about Annapolis. Yea, that's right – Annapolis. I'm just as anxious as all of you about what's going to happen or what Israel is going to do over the next thirteen months. And I'm afraid. Like many of you, I'm holding my breath. We've been here before and we know what's at stake: the security of Israel, the well being of the Jewish people, and the very existence of our home land. We have no reason to be confident about peace treaties or just how trustworthy Israel's neighbors are. Oslo taught us that. Ehud Olmert is not a very strong leader nor is Mahmud Abbas. These days George Bush has very little political capital or influence in the Middle East. So the latest round of political talks about Israel and her neighbors are beginning at a significant disadvantage.

But that doesn't mean that Israel shouldn't try – or that we should be less hopeful. New York Times editorialist, Thomas Friedman, recently wrote that negotiations are not about logic but surprises. He wrote that political treaties take, “something that has been sorely lacking (in the Middle East) since the deaths of Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein: a certain moral courage to something surprising.” Friedman goes on to say that since the year 2000 the only people who have surprised us are the bad guys. But history has shown us that that doesn't have to be the case. Surprises are possible. Isn't that what Chanukah and the story of Joseph are all about?

So what can I offer today, if not an opinion, as Israel enters the dangerous terrain of peace negotiations once again? All I can offer is a story and a prayer. That's what rabbis do best. And I hope that both will give us reason for hope – and reason to stand back and let the 'process' work its way towards a more hopeful destiny.

First I offer the following story as a gift and a symbol of hope. It's a story familiar to all of us; a story about a bunch of brothers who hated their younger brother. Each managed to do things that angered the other. The younger brother was arrogant and favored by their father and let his older brothers know in

no uncertain terms that one day he would rule over them. And the older brothers – well, the committed unspeakable acts of violence against their younger brother and left him for dead. Neither party had any reason to trust the other. How could there be forgiveness? How could this younger brother ever forgive his older brothers and how could the older brothers know if their younger brother was any less arrogant? For that matter how could the younger brother ever let his guard down long enough to find out if his siblings had changed? This is a story of forgiveness and reconciliation. It's a story we all know; and in the end it inspires us with its surprise ending: the younger brother reveals his true identity and forgives his brothers. He tells them that all that has happened was part of God's plan. He embraces his brothers and he trusts them – even though he has no reason to do so.

Do you recognize this story? You probably think I'm talking about Joseph. But actually I'm I've been talking about Palestinians and Israelis. Younger and older aside, this too is a story about anger and reconciliation, about taking risks and saying you are sorry.

It is so easy for us to look at the Middle East, to tell our story, and to air our grievances. Israelis have many good reasons – in fact thousands of reasons not to trust its neighbors. They have reason to be doubtful about negotiations not just because of the past but because of what's happening now. Rockets continue to rain down on S'derot and Israel has yet to be given a reason not to be vigilant in securing its borders. But peace always involves risk. I'm constantly reminded of Yitzhak Rabin's famous words: "You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavory enemies." Last week I attended the funeral of my colleague and friend, Rabbi Maurice Simckes. There were several speakers at the funeral, some of whom were orthodox family and friends. I was shocked when one of them turned to the casket at the end of his eulogy and asked the good rabbi to intercede in heaven for those who were ill – and also, to ask God to make the negotiations in Annapolis fail.

I could not think of a more obscene and un-Jewish prayer. No matter how you may feel about what ought to be on the negotiating table or what the status of Jerusalem should be or how Israel should deal with its neighbors, to pray that there be no peace in the Middle East, that Israel should continue to live in a state of war, that there should be no forgiveness, no compromise, no repentance on either side – frankly I was horrified. Nit pas nisht – this is not how a Jew acts!

The Talmud tells a story about Rabbi Meir and his famous wife, Beruriah. When some delinquents roughed up Rabbi Meir, he prayed for them to die. When Beruriah heard this, she said: What are you thinking of? Are you relying on the verse "Let sinners be consumed?" But, in fact, is the word in this verse "sinners"? Rather it says "sins." Moreover, look at the end of the verse: "And let the wicked be no more." This implies that when sins come to an end, the wicked will be no more. You should therefore seek mercy for them, that they turn in penitence, so that they wino longer be wicked. Accordingly, Rabbi Meir besought mercy for them, and they did turn in penitence.

Did the speaker at Rabbi Simckes' funeral come from the same tradition I do; one in which the quest for peace is the highest of all callings? Again – this is not a political statement – but a statement of Jewish values. I'm mystified by those who call themselves religious but who don't have enough faith in God to fulfill the biblical verse, "Seek peace and pursue it." What Israel needs today is our faith, our fortitude and forgiveness above all.

I'd also like to offer a prayer today for Annapolis. That is all that we as American Jews should be doing at a time like this. We can talk all we want about what's going to happen or what should happen in the Middle East, but our lives are not on the line. Israelis who put their lives at risk every time they enter the army and every time they drive through the country side have a right to have a say in what

Israel does or doesn't do. We don't. Our job is to support Israel whatever it decides and to stand by Israel by visiting, advocating, and showing Israel's best face.

Fortunately Israel is a democracy in which every person has a say. Israelis are clearly not of one mind on the present negotiations. And the fact that there people on the far right and left who disagree with Ehud Olmert gives me great hope. Let us have faith not only in God then, but the political process – that it will find a way that will best secure Israel's future. We can only hope that there will also be people of good faith on the side with whom Israel can speak.

So I'd like to conclude this morning with two prayers, from two different faith traditions: Let these prayers be a reminder that there are voices of reconciliation on both sides – we need to listen to them and not the voices of hate that divide us. The first prayer is adapted from the words of Rabbi Herbert Bronstein:

O God of Hope:  
 Sustain those who continue  
 With undiminished determination  
 To build peace in the land from which, of old,  
 Out of brokenness, violence and destruction  
 Nevertheless hope emerged  
 For so many people of faith...  
 Bless the spiritual seed of Abraham together  
 With the light of Your presence.  
 For in that light  
 We have found a way of justice and mercy,  
 and a vision of peace.  
 We praise you, God, Giver of peace  
 who commands us to seek peace.

And finally I conclude with a prayer by Dawud Ahmad Assad from the Council of Mosques:

In the name of God, the Everlasting Merciful One,  
 Cherisher of the worlds and worthy of all praise, Our Lord: You have created us  
 From a single pair, male and female  
 And made us into nations and tribes  
 That we may know one another  
 (and not despise one another).  
 Help us to love each other  
 And take hatred and anger out of our hearts  
 So that the people of the Book  
 (Jews, Christians, and Moslems) in the Middle East  
 May live together in peace and justice

To these two prayers we say, so may it be Your will, O Lord, And let us say:

Amen!!