

CyberTorah: The Surreal Life

I was on my home this afternoon from the Hartman Institute. I had an amazing day of learning, studying first with a noted Biblical scholar from Hebrew University, and then from one of my favorite teachers of Torah, Avivah Zornberg. Further, I had been studying in this wonderful and hopeful mix of Reform, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, and Conservative colleagues. So I was feeling hopeful and at peace.

Street signs in Jerusalem reflect the mixed nature of this city by being in Hebrew, English, and Arabic. As I got close to my apartment in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem, I saw that someone had spray painted over the Arabic writing on some of the street signs as if to erase the Arab presence.

Earlier in the week, I had seen a different view from my cousin. She is about to start her military service. She is very proud of her decision to serve her country. At the same time, she wanted to share with my children that she worked with a number of Arabs and had several Arab friends. She has the courage to defend her country and the courage to see that we are all created in God's image.

Then, as I came into the apartment, my wife gestured for me to come into the bedroom and talk quietly to her for a moment. I started worrying that something is wrong with one my kids. Carol tells me, "There was an incident with an Arab driver in a bulldozer on Jaffa street by the bus terminal. I haven't told the kids, but they let me know at camp." What a strange reversal of the prophecies of peace—the plowshare was turned into a sword.

I always find it surreal when I read of these incidents at home. My own life continues on its normal pattern while people thousands of miles away have had their lives overturned and a little piece of their security in day to day life stolen. Being in Jerusalem a couple of miles away from the incident amplified that surreal quality a thousand fold.

A close friend and colleague participating in this two week learning program with me still came over for dinner with his daughter. We still went to the kosher take out place around the block to get some dinner (with this guy who keeps giving us free food – try this, its really good). Nothing changes, except for the people who have lost loved ones or been injured in this terrible incident. Nothing changes, except that one little bit of security that my day will proceed as planned has been stolen from me.

It resonates with what I learned earlier in the day with Aviva Zornberg. We were studying about Jacob and the birth of Joseph. Joseph is introduced by the Torah telling us Jacob is now settled. And yet, as the plot unfolds, we see Jacob's life torn apart by the apparent loss of Joseph at the hands of his brothers. Rashi tells us that Jacob wanted to be settled. He was looking for a sense of shalva, of release from anxiety about the future.

Rashi tells us that such release is impossible in this world. The plot of our lives is a lot thicker, a lot more inexplicable, than we might like. The Ishbitzer (19th Century Hasidic Commentator) teaches that Jacob was a perfect shepherd. He never lost a sheep. He now realizes, after losing Joseph, that he has sinned against the wolves. That is, it is exactly that inexplicable point, that place of terror and the unknown, that is also the source of hope. Jacob realizes that by trying to control everything, by trying to find shalva, he is shutting out change that can mean terror and loss but also change that can signify hope.

When Israelis yearn for shalva, for contentment that tries to pretend the Arab world doesn't exist, they are sinning against the wolves. They are spraying graffiti over Arabic writing as if they could then erase

the Arab presence. I get it, especially after a day like this. That attitude, however, will never lead to security and makes it harder to achieve a real peace, a peace of completeness, shalom, rather than of empty contentment, shalva.

I don't know what that real peace would look like or how to get there. As a visitor to this wonderful place, I don't have the chutzpah to impose my solutions, either. The problems are real. The terrorist threat is ongoing and dangerous. And as the silliness earlier with the graffiti illustrates, dangerous in subtle ways as it damages the soul of Israel.

Tonight, writing this, I feel like my cousin has it right. She is ready to defend but also ready to befriend. I see so little hope in the attitudes of those who use terror to further their own narrow ends. I don't know or understand that world well enough to do anything other than pray for a change of heart. Yet I see a world of hope even amid chaos in the honest courage to turn away from shalva, the peace of ostriches, and towards shalom, the peace of heroes, by my cousin the almost soldier.

May God offer comfort to those in mourning after today's senseless loss of life, and offer healing to those wounded to no purpose.

Shabbat Shalom from the turbulent City of Peace,

Rabbi David Booth