

## Shabbat Parashat Toldot What Does Being Jewish Mean to Me?

A few days ago, I was asked to think about the question, "What does being Jewish mean to you?" It was noted that as a Rabbi, it was a very interesting thing about which to think. Indeed, it was... After taking a moment to reflect on all the ideas that were coming to mind, I came up with one word: PEOPLEHOOD. I noted that Judaism is more than a religion of beliefs, more than a culture, more than a nation, more than a system of observances and ritual practices. It is all of these things and even more which, when put together, create a PEOPLE. My Jewishness means being connected to other Jews all around the world with whom I share a history, set of values, language, and cycle of religious life. We may not agree about all things related to being Jewish, but those are so outnumbered by what unites us as a people. In reflecting on some of the behaviors of our matriarchs and patriarchs in this week's *parasha*/Torah portion and those from recent weeks, I am struck by how the theme of peoplehood was so central to their lives, even though they were just planting the seeds of the people that would grow from their descendants.

Last week, we read of the story of Avraham who goes to great lengths to make sure that his son Yitzhak marries within the family clan. This week, as Yaakov is about to run away from home to escape his brother Eisav after stealing his firstborn blessing, his parents instruct him not to marry a woman from among the Canaanites. Rather, he must also find a woman from the family clan to marry. In upcoming *parashiyot*, Yaakov goes to great efforts to keep his family (the offspring of the 12 tribes of Israel) together and to maintain connection with the traditions of his father and grandfather. To what end was all of this effort? To ensure the survival and continuity of the new people and way of life, which Avraham had begun, and which was a special inheritance of all future Israelite/Jewish generations. It is their efforts that made our being here today possible and it is their efforts which serve as a reminder of our responsibility to display our loyalty and solidarity to our people, no matter where in the world they are and in whatever situation they find themselves.

As I am sitting here and typing this d'var Torah today, flashing across my computer screen in a neighboring window are images and news updates from Israel. To read about hundreds of rockets shot from within Gaza toward civilian targets in Israel makes me feel profound outrage and sadness. To then read anti-Israel biased European and North American reports on the events that have thus far transpired only make my emotions even more extreme. I question the common sense and moral foundation of those who refuse to see Israel as any other country in the world, with a right to defend itself against terrorist acts of war, which occur on a daily basis. From where do I draw hope? Knowing that even in this time of extreme difficulty, Israel raises the bar and lives up to the values and ethics that our people have established as part of our tradition. Israel sends leaflets into civilian areas (where terrorists are hiding out or keeping rocket launchers and artillery) that might be targeted, warning people to evacuate in advance. Israel does not pull the trigger without taking preventative measures and collecting intelligence to have as

much clarity as possible about terrorist installations and locations of terrorist leaders and masterminds...Are mistakes made and unfortunate casualties a reality of this struggle? They certainly are, but to see Israel's restraint, value for innocent human life, and care for "ethics of war" inspires me to feel hope and be all the more dedicated to my sense of peoplehood and support of my brothers and sisters in Israel. If there is any time for the Jewish people of the world to put differences aside and unite around our peoplehood, it is at times like these.

With a class of Grade 7 students this week, we talked about how when some of members of our people are suffering, we are all suffering. When some of us are at risk, we are all at risk. I pray for a time when unity among our people can be inspired by peaceful times and positive events. However, we are not in such a time yet. May we all take time this Shabbat, in the spirit of our forefathers and foremothers who struggled to give birth to this people of ours, to focus energies on our support of our extended Israeli family in distress and to pray for a time when Israel need not take up arms to defend its right to exist.

Shabbat Shalom!