



Parashat Vayetze
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44-1: What Will You Do About It?
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I have been doing some research on the internet lately about what constitutes a landslide in the context of a democracy. And while there is no precise definition, there seems to be a consensus that if one candidate beats another by 10 percentage points, say 55 to 45, that would be a landslide. Issues are complicated. Things can be looked at in multiple ways. Reasonable people can disagree. If the winner gets 55 percent of the vote, many thinkers would call that a landslide.

Now, if one candidate gets almost all the vote, say 98%, something is off. 98% of reasonable people deciding things on the merits can't usually agree on anything of substance. Typically, for example, Saddam Hussein, before the war, would get 98 to 99 % of the vote, because something was off. It wasn't a real vote. He was a dictator.

So I want you to keep a vote tally in mind. 44-1. If 44 out of the 45 voters vote one way, if 98% of the voters vote one way, there is something suspicious going on—not on the merits. But before getting back to 44-1, let's talk about the burial practices of our patriarchs and matriarchs in the Torah.

Just two weeks ago, in *parashat chaye Sarah*, Sarah dies, and Abraham has to bury her. He buys a burial plot in *eretz yisrael* called *Maarat Hamachpelah*. The Torah devotes no fewer than 20 verses, Genesis 23, verses 1-20, to this real estate transaction, recording the negotiation between Abraham and the Hittites, and the fact that he pays 400 shekels of silver for this burial plot. *Maarat Hamachpelah* will become the burial site of three biblical couples: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. We know that being buried in Israel was important

to our ancestors. Jacob's dying wish was to make sure that though he would die in Egypt, he would be buried in Israel. He made Joseph swear. And then when Joseph is about to die, his dying wish was to make sure that though he would die in Egypt, he would be buried in Israel. He made his brothers swear. Generations later, during the exodus, Moses, with everything else he had to do, takes special pains to take *atzmot yosef*, the bones of Joseph, out of Egypt, so that, as the book of Joshua records, Joseph could be buried in Israel. His mother Rachel was also buried in the land of Israel, in Efrat.

Why do I bring up the burial of all of our biblical ancestors in *eretz yisrael*, and what does this have to do with a 44-1 vote?

Last month an arm of the United Nations, UNESCO, which stands for the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, voted 44 to 1 that these Jewish burial sites in Israel are, I quote, an "integral part of the occupied Palestinian territories." Only the United States voted no. The UN voted, 44 to 1, that the site could be called by its Arabic name, "Haram al-Ibrahim"; or by its English name, Cave of the Patriarchs. But on point of principle UNESCO would not call the burial site by its Hebrew or biblical name of *maarat hamachpelah*. The UN voted, 44 to 1, that "any unilateral action by the Israeli authorities is to be considered a violation of international law." The UN voted, 44 to 1, that the place where our matriarch Rachel is buried is to be called by its Arabic name Bilal bin Rabah Mosque, or by its English name, Rachel's Tomb. But on point of principle the UN would not call it by its Hebrew name, *kever rachel*.

The UN voted, 44 to 1, to demand that Israel remove these two sites from its list of national heritage sites. In other words, it is now a violation of international law for Israel to list as part of its national heritage those sites where our patriarchs and matriarchs are buried. By the

way, and just so that we are clear, Muslims regularly pray at both sites, unlike Jews who were barred from both sites before 1967.

What is the significance to us, today, of those portions of the Torah that tie our patriarchs and matriarchs to the land of Israel? It establishes *that the Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel is ancient and authentic*. We lived in this land. We loved in this land. We died in this land. We buried our beloved departed in this land. This land was our home.

It is because these ancient burial sites show an ancient connection that they are so troublesome to many in the Palestinian world.

The UNESCO resolution is part of a campaign to delegitimize Israel by arguing that the Jewish people are colonialists. We are imperialists. What the English did to India, they colonized it; what the French did to Algeria, they colonized it; what the Spanish did to the New World, they colonized it. That is what the Jews did to Palestine. They colonized it. They stole their land.

We know today, the argument continues, that the English should get out of India. They don't belong there. We know the French should get out of Algeria. They don't belong there. So too, the Jews should get out of Palestine. They don't belong there. Israel should not exist. It does not have a right to exist. It was a mistake to let it come into being in the first place, and the world only made that mistake because its conscience was addled by guilt caused by the Holocaust. Why should the Palestinians have to pay for Western Europe's sin?

But in order to make that claim, the campaign to delegitimize Israel must deny that there is an ancient and authentic connection of Jews to the land of Israel. That is why it is so crucial to call the place where Abraham is buried Haram al-Ibrahim—and not *maarat hamachpela*. That is why it is so crucial to call the place where Rachel is buried Bilal bin Rabah Mosque—and not

kever Rachel. It is no coincidence that the UN also voted overwhelmingly to prohibit Israel from doing archeological activities in biblical sites, including the Temple Mount. Archeology is a problem for the campaign to delegitimize Israel, because it shows that the Jews lived in Israel thousands of years ago for thousands of years. Therefore, prohibit archaeology. This is of a piece with the effort to deny that the Temple ever existed. Google “Temple denial.” You will see that it is real. The campaign to delegitimize Israel has to erase the inconvenient fact that the Temple once stood.

Now here is the scary thing about this campaign to delegitimize Israel. *It is working.*
44-1.

Now do not think that this campaign to delegitimize Israel—we stole their land, we stole their land, we stole their land—don’t think that it isn’t coming here, even to America. It is. Even to Newton. It already has. A U.S. Bishop from Newton, Bishop Cyrille Salim Bustros, said just last month, and I quote: “the concept of the promised land cannot be used as a base for the justification of the return of Jews to Israel and the displacement of Palestinians.” He adds: “sacred Scripture should not be used to justify the occupation by Israel of Palestine.” This Newton Bishop is arguing, in other words, that there are *not* two conflicting narratives: Palestinians who lived there, and Jews who came home. No. It is Palestinians who lived there, and Jews who displaced them and stole their land. In other words, there is no justification for Israel’s existence. We are colonizers and occupiers. Israel is an illegitimate state.

We are in denial if we do not see that this campaign to delegitimize Israel is happening, that it is effective, that it has swept 98 percent of the world, 44 to 1, and that it is coming to Newton. So what shall our response be?

When the Jewish people were in danger in the 40s, the American Jewish community was hamstrung by its silence. We were too timid and too insecure of our own place in American society to raise our voices. That's why Temple Emanuel did nothing during the Holocaust.

And now? We are not timid. We have a voice. We are not insecure. We have confidence. But now we have a different problem. Not silence. But polarization. We disagree with one another, sometimes passionately, about Israel. This week's contretemps between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu about building those 1,000 units in Har Homa evokes the strong polarization that exists within the Jewish community on Israel.

And yet, we cannot let polarization lead to paralysis. We cannot let our collective voice be stilled now on the issue that unite us—like Israel's very embattled right to exist—because of issues that divide us.

Make no mistake about it. Left of center and right of center. J Street and AIPAC. Labor and Likkud. Democrat and Republican. The 44 nations that voted against our being able to list *maarat hamachpelah* as a Jewish site, or to refer to its Hebrew name, group all of us together. They think *all* Jews in Israel don't belong there, whatever our political convictions.

Now is the time to come together for Israel, and at Temple Emanuel we are going to do just that. On Sunday morning, December 5th, we are partnering with CJP to equip *all of us* to be empowered to make the case for Israel here in Newton. When your friends and neighbors, when your fellow parents on the soccer field, when your colleagues at the water cooler, read that a Newton bishop decries our occupation of Palestine, that we stole their land, we have the sacred obligation, *all of us*, to persuade that friend and neighbor that Israel has a right to exist; that the Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel is ancient and authentic; that right, principle and

morality are on our side; and that the campaign to delegitimize Israel is Jew hatred, and we will not stand for it.

44-1. What will we do about it? In the 1940s we were silent. Will we be silent now? See you on December 5th. Shabbat shalom.