



*Parshat Yitro*  
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**How Do We Mourn a Bulldozer?**  
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This past week I got an email from a colleague that stumped me. The email came from Ilene Beckman, the wonderful head of our religious school. She wrote to ask whether on Tuesday afternoon we should have a school-wide assembly to talk about the passing of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. That posed a conundrum. We are committed to teaching our children, among other things, two important values.

First, love of Israel, love of the Jewish homeland. In every classroom you will see blue and white, and Israeli flags, and Hebrew letters, and photos of our beloved *eretz yisrael*.

Second, total intellectual integrity. We never teach our children things we don't believe. In teaching the creation stories, for example, we talk about poetry and parable, and how that is different from a historical or scientific account of creation.

These two values come into certain tension with Ariel Sharon. Compare his funeral to that of the late great slain and martyred Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin. Rabin's funeral summoned feelings of love and admiration that were pure and pristine. At Rabin's funeral, President Clinton famously spoke those words: "shalom chaver." At Sharon's funeral, by contrast, there was no shalom chaver. There was no American President. There was Vice President Biden, putting it very well, that Sharon was a complex man living in a complex time in a complex region. Not shalom chaver, but complex. Not shalom chaver, but bulldozer, Sharon's nickname. Bulldozers are needed. But bulldozers also create complexity. How do we convey that to third graders?

Sharon's complexity consists of at least four points.

First, Sharon was a warrior for the Jewish people and the Jewish state, a virtuoso on the battlefield. He applied that military virtuosity in service of the overarching principle of his life: the establishment of a safe, secure and strong Jewish homeland in the land of Israel.

His military virtuosity literally saved Israel in 1973. In the Yom Kippur War Israel was surprised and unprepared. Things were quite bleak when Sharon figured out some daring and bold way to cross the Suez Canal behind Egyptian lines, which allowed the Israeli army to choke off Egypt's supply lines, and ultimately to encircle the Egyptian army. Sharon saved the day. Sharon saved the Jewish state. That is beyond dispute.

Sharon's other act of military heroism had to do with fighting Palestinian terrorism in the 1950s. Sharon created and led an elite commando unit called Unit 101 that operated behind enemy lines to fight fire with fire, to retaliate for Palestinian raids that murdered innocent Israelis. Sharon was strength when the Jewish people needed strength.

But then there is point two. When Sharon the bulldozer fought, query whether he crossed lines that Jews, even in battle, ought not to cross. In the battle of Qibya, Sharon's troops blew up dozens of homes, which resulted in 69 casualties, more than half of them women and children. In his memoir Sharon wrote that the unit had checked the houses before the explosives were detonated, and they thought that the houses were empty. He added the following: "Now...the terrorist gangs would think twice before striking, now that they knew for sure they would be hit back."

What do we do with that? Either way we go, it makes us uncomfortable. If we say, we were not there, we cannot judge, we live in the comfort of Newton, Sharon and his unit had to play by local rules to survive, that makes us uncomfortable, to give him a pass on killing civilians. But if we judge them, if we say these Jewish soldiers must have known that they were

going to kill civilians by blowing up dozens of homes, that is not okay, we cannot give him a pass on the basis of local rules, but must insist on *taharat neshek*, the Jewish values of an ethical war, that also makes us uncomfortable, for who are we to judge people who lived in a world of complexity that we will never know. All in all, hard to convey this to third graders—and that is without even mentioning Sabra and Shatila.

Point three. Sharon changed his mind on important policy matters, and he took dramatic risks. For 20 years, from the 70s through the 90s, Sharon advocated for the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. But he did a turnabout as Prime Minister in 2004 when he drove through Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza. He was bold and daring when it came to war. He was bold and daring when it came to trying to make peace.

Point four. For all of his warrior strength, Sharon also embodied the vulnerability and frailty of the human condition. His first wife died. His oldest son died. And eight years ago, while literally at the apogee of his power, while a sitting Prime Minister, Sharon was felled with a stroke which left him comatose these last eight years.

And so it was that Ilene's email left me with a conundrum, for how to convey all that complexity to a third grader. It turns out that for our children, the assembly was just right. One of our core teachers is an Israeli who had served with Sharon, and he talked to our children, in a matter of fact way, about Sharon the warrior. Ilene presented a YouTube video which showed Sharon with all the historic greats of Israel like Ben Gurion. We ended by singing Hatikvah. A nice and fitting way for 3<sup>rd</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> graders to mark the moment.

But now *our* work begins. What do *we* do with Ariel Sharon? How do *we* mourn the bulldozer? All of which raises a much larger, and more universal, question: how do we relate to complexity, in life and in death?

And all of which, in a certain way, relates to the hot new book about Israel, My Promised Land, by Ari Shavit. There is a central question, even enigma, about this book. Shavit is a Jew, an Israeli, a Zionist, a former paratrooper. His great grandfather was one of the earliest Zionists who came to Israel in 1897. He is the father of Israelis, the father of Zionists. Shavit *loves* Israel. Shavit *is* Israel.

And yet his book is all about telling us the real deal that perhaps we did not even want to know when it comes to Israel. He wants us to know that, contrary to Golda Meir's famous fable, Israel was *not* a land without a people for a people without a land. He wants us to know that there were Arabs in Israel, lots of them. He wants us to know that there were Arab towns and villages where these Arabs lived, lots of them. He wants us to know that in the course of founding the Jewish state, there was a civil war between Jew and Arab, where both sides acted at times cruelly to one another. He wants us to know about Lydda, when the Israeli army kicked out tens of thousands of Arabs, a story that most of us did not know.

And the obvious question is, if he loves Israel so much, *why* does he want us to know all this stuff?

When he came to Boston a few weeks ago, he said that he wrote this book, and told us hard truths we did not know, *so that we could love Israel more*.

Now how does that work? How is it that by knowing the hard stuff, the painful stuff, the stuff that we'd rather not know, we love Israel more?

Here is how it works. Our mission is to love the real, not the gauzy, mythologized ideal. It is hard to love the real. But it is also real to love the real. It is easy to love the gauzy, mythologized ideal. But it is not real. That's why Shavit is telling us more about Israel, so that we can love the real deal.

We know that is true with the people in our lives. To really love your mother, to really love your father, to really love your spouse, is to love them for who they really are, with all the rough edges, with all the hard parts. And when they die, our work is to mourn them for who they really were, in all of their flawed and outrageous and glorious humanity, not to mourn an ideal that never was.

That brings us back to shalom chaver. Yes, when Rabin was assassinated, President Clinton said shalom chaver. And, yes, that lovely epithet was real in a certain sense. It drew on the fact that Rabin made the pivot in history to shake Arafat's hand on the White House lawn and to try for Oslo. It drew on the fact that he was assassinated by an extremist while he had the song Shir LaShalom in his pocket, his copy of the song of peace stained with his own blood. And yet, just saying shalom chaver in its own way reduces Rabin to a gauzy, mythologized ideal. There's more complexity there, that shalom chaver does not get to. For example, in Shavit's wrenching chapter on Lydda, it was operations officer Yitzhak Rabin who issued the written order to the Yiftach Brigade: "The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without regard to age." p. 108.

It is easy to love shalom chaver, but not totally real. It is harder to love bulldozer, but bulldozer is real. And here's why getting the mourning of Ariel Sharon right is super important.

Because to appreciate and mourn Sharon, in all of his reality, is to appreciate and love Israel, in all of its reality. He was bulldozer because Israel needed a bulldozer.

For our mother, for our father, for our spouse, for our heroes, for our people's homeland, can we know the real deal, and still love? May Ariel Sharon rest in peace. Shabbat shalom.