

PESACH SERMON – 1ST DAY
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RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

The Fifth Son

“*K’neged arbaah vanim dibra Torah* ... regarding four children does the Torah speak. One is wise, one is wicked, one is simple and one who does not know how to ask.” We Jews have been saying those immortal lines at the Pesach Seder for thousands of years. But this year is different ... this year there is a new child – a fifth child – one who is not wise or wicked or simple or knows not how to ask ... but one who is just plain stupid – the fifth child.

What took place in Israel when Vice President Biden came on a goodwill visit cannot be described as having been anything else but downright stupid. Here came the Vice President of the United States, a man with a long record of support for Israel, and he came for the purpose of showing support for that relationship which has seemed a bit shaky since the election of President Obama. And he came at a time when Israel needs the support of the United States if anything is to be done to stop Iran from developing nuclear arms. And as soon as he comes into town an announcement is made that new Israeli homes are going to be built in east Jerusalem. Now I don’t care – and I do believe - that Israel has the right to build anyplace in Jerusalem, but the fact is, for decades the whole issue of settlements has been a major issue separating the U.S. and Israel. And I don’t care – and I do believe - that it is not the settlements that have been slowing down the peace process – it’s the Palestinians who, in a sense, have never started it. And I don’t care, and I do believe, that Jerusalem is not a settlement. But say what you want ... to make such an announcement at such a time was downright stupid! It made everyone look bad ... the Israelis, the Americans, and it gave the Palestinians another excuse not to negotiate. So why did Israel do it? We don’t know for sure who, in fact, did it! But it’s hard to believe that it was accidental or coincidental. It’s hard to believe because this has happened before. It happened several times when the American President was George H. Bush, who Israel wasn’t too crazy about. And it seemed as if every time Secretary James Baker came to Israel, a new settlement was announced. The purpose for that then – and one might suspect now – was to make a statement to the United States that Israel doesn’t care what you think ... we don’t care how much support you give us ... this land is ours and we’re going to build wherever we want! And if that, in fact, is what motivated the announcement to take place when Vice President Biden was there, and if that in fact is why Israelis on the right applauded the announcement ... then I have to tell you: that is stupid! That, in fact, is a perfect definition of being stupid!

What does it mean to be stupid? Well, in some ways it’s like the Supreme Court’s definition of pornography: you know it when you see it! But Albert Einstein gave a definition about insanity that might very well be used for stupidity as well when he said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Quite a few times in the past Israel has tried this maneuver of making these loaded kinds of announcements in order to make it clear how strong they feel about the settlements ... but it hasn’t worked! It hasn’t changed anyone’s mind! Israel keeps making announcements and pronouncements and it hasn’t won Israel a single supporter for the settlements or for Jerusalem. In fact, it has had just the opposite affect ... there used to be a time when *American* leaders spoke of an “undivided Jerusalem.” Not any more! Today there is not one single country in the entire world which has

uttered a single word in support of the settlements or for Israel to keep east Jerusalem. During George Bush's administration it was these kinds of settlement announcements that led the U.S. government to take back loan guarantees for Israel. During Bibi Netanyahu's first go-round as Prime Minister, a similar announcement was made just as Secretary of State Madeline Albright was leaving Israel, leading her to state: "You tell Bibi he needs to stop worrying about his right wing and start worrying about the United States." So you tell me: what did they expect was going to happen this time around? Sure, it might make the right-wing hawks in Israel feel good, but what is the good of that if it only makes the world turn further away from us, and antagonizes the only friend that Israel has? Pretty stupid of Israel to do this.

To make matters even worse, stupidity is contagious! You can pass it on to your friends. And it would seem to me that America's reaction to what Israel did was pretty stupid as well. There isn't a negative word or action that some member of the U.S administration didn't use in regard to Israel and the Biden affair; you name it, and they've said it and did it. Secretary Clinton brutally put down Mr. Netanyahu in a 45 minute phone call, making demands of Israel to show that its interested in peace. President Obama's advisor, David Axelrod said the settlement announcement was "an affront" and "an insult." Vice President Biden said "it threatened America's vital interests." Israel's Ambassador to America, Michael Oren, was dressed down by the State Department; our Mid-east negotiator cancelled his visit. In the words of one commentator, all this added up to "some of the harshest official language in recent memory toward a country with which the U.S. was not actually at war." I guess I could make my peace with all this if not for the fact that last month the U.S. announced it was resending our Ambassador to Syria. We had removed our Ambassador five years ago because of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, whom most everyone agrees was assassinated by direction of the Syrians. In the past five years Syria has done nothing to make matters better; all it has done is try to secretly build a nuclear reactor, re-arm Hezbollah and tighten its noose around Lebanon. But that didn't stop the U.S. from announcing that we are resending their Ambassador with a statement from Secretary of State Hilary Clinton calling on Syria "to begin to move away from the relationship with Iran."

The very next day ... the very next day, a public conference was held in Syria, bringing together Hafez al-Hasad, the leader of Syria, President Ahmadinejad, the leader of Iran, and Sheikh Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. The Washington Post reported that "the Presidents of Iran and Syria on Thursday ridiculed U.S. policy in the region and pledged to create a Middle East 'without Zionists,' combining a slap at recent U.S. overtures and a threat to Israel with an endorsement of one of the region's defining alliances." The headline the Post put on this story was: "Iran, Syria Mock U.S. Policy." This wasn't a slap in the United States' face? This wasn't undiplomatic? This wasn't a threat to America's interests? This wasn't an affront and an insult? But did you hear of any crisis in Syrian-American relations? Did you hear our government announce that it wasn't going to send its Ambassador?

There nothing was said! Here, not only condemnation, but a United States announcement that it was Israel which is making negotiations more difficult ... and it is Israel that has to do certain gestures: to cancel the settlement plan, to release more prisoners to the Palestinians to show that Israel is really interested in peace. And what should the Palestinians do? Not a word! And I tell you: this is stupid, stupid, stupid! Because this is doing the same thing all over again expecting a different result. This is just what President Obama did when he went to Cairo and made that speech in which he called upon Israel to halt all settlements. And he called on the Palestinians to ... well, he really didn't call upon them to do much of anything. All he was *hoping* for ... hoping for ... was that some of the other Arab countries would make some friendly gesture toward Israel. Well, since then none of the Arab countries have made any gesture toward

Israel. Since then Israel announced a partial settlement freeze. Since then the Prime Minister of Israel announced that he accepted the two-state solution. Since then more and more road blocks and check-points have been removed from the West Bank. And since then the Palestinians have refused to negotiate, even indirectly! Sticking it to Israel *then* served no useful purpose except to make the Palestinians more intransigent and it's sheer stupidity to think that doing it again will have any different result. And my greatest fear is that our President is going to do more stupid things regarding Israel in the weeks and months ahead.

Now the only question we are left with is why do our leaders, Netanyahu and Obama and so many others, act this way? Why do they find it so difficult to admit that they were wrong in their approach, and to try something else? Why didn't Netanyahu on day one say: It's crazy for us to be acting this way ... go and find who made this announcement and shoot him. And why didn't President Obama declare, after Cairo and its results: We got it all wrong ... Israel is ready to negotiate and the Palestinians won't even do it indirectly. Indeed, why didn't Pharaoh, after the first plague, realize that he was wrong and let the Jews go? It was pretty stupid when you think of it, that after each plague Pharaoh thought the results were going to be different.

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, one of Israel's leading thinkers, explains in his book that there was a need for ten plagues and not one, just like there was a need for ten sayings in creating the world and not one, just as there was a need for Abraham to be tested ten times and not once. In Aviner's words, "Abrupt changes can sometimes breed unendurable crises; for this reason the plagues in Egypt did not come all at once. The psychological upheaval did not happen in a single day or even in a month. Rather, Jewish and Egyptian hearts gradually absorbed this fundamental change in the course of world history." He's right, you know: people don't get it right away! John Edwards and Tiger Woods and Gov. Sanford and Elliott Spitzer and Bill Clinton and all the others ... would have been much better off if right from the start they said: We blew it! Netanyahu and Obama would be better off if they said the same. But as Aviner points out, somehow that's just not human nature. We change gradually ... we grow gradually ... and sometimes along the way we pay a bitter price for that.

But I must tell you that in the behavior of both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, in their reluctance to admit the error in their ways, I think there is something else going on here. And it has to do with something we as Jews start doing this evening. During the days between Pesach and Shavuot we Jews fulfill a Biblical commandment when every night we recite a blessing counting another day until we reach Shavuot. The accepted law is that if you miss the count for one full day, you can continue counting, but you don't recite the blessing. To help make sure you don't miss the count and to help make sure you have the right day, the custom in many synagogues is that at the evening service the service concludes with the rabbi pronouncing the blessing, and pronouncing the day in the count.

Now, what happens if the rabbi – the rabbi who is supposed to recite the blessing and announce the count for the congregation – what happens if the rabbi, by mistake, forgets to count one day? He can no longer recite the blessing! But how is that going to look to the congregation if someone else does it? Everyone is going to know that the rabbi blew it! And won't that be a poor reflection on him?

Rabbi Yissochor Frand, in one of his lectures, points out that basically there are two answers given to the question. One comes from a great giant in Torah learning, the Beit Halevi, who writes that this situation happened to him, and how he worked out, through some Halachic technicality, a way for him to recite the blessing the following night so that his congregants would not know that he had missed a day.

But there is another approach. This approach was taken by a great Chassidic master, Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz, a friend/disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism. The Baal Shem Tov once remarked of him, “A soul such as that of Rav Pinchas comes down to this world only once in 500 years.” Well, this great soul one year skipped a day in the count of the Omer. And you know what he did? When it came time to count the Omer, he told the congregation: I missed a day! I can’t say the brocho. He considered this an opportunity for a great learning experience, for him and for his congregation.

We can all learn from him. And by “we” I not only mean President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, I also mean the Pope, and I most certainly include rabbis. Pope Benedict has a crisis on his hands. It has to do with sexual abuse that took place on his watch when he was an Archbishop in Germany. It took place 30 years ago but he didn’t properly confront it and now it has exploded, threatening his moral authority. Just think how much better off he would have been if he had had the courage at the beginning to say: The Church was wrong in this matter. People are going to be punished and from now on things are going to be done differently. Just think how much better off he would be today.

And let me ask you: when was the last time you heard a rabbi say, “I was wrong ... we made a mistake.” And you know what? Rabbis have an opportunity to do that these days. We, as a Jewish community, sat back smugly when the stories of children’s abuse made headlines in the Catholic Church: “Not in our schools or synagogues could something like that happen,” we said, even though many of us knew that wasn’t true. Now we can no longer hide from it. It’s in newspapers and on the Web ... the stories are there. That is not the fault of the newspapers! That is the fault of the perpetrators. And that is the fault of rabbis and others who did nothing, and continue to do nothing and who try to hide the problem rather than admit to it.

I know it’s not easy admitting that you are wrong and that you’re going to change. Ask yourselves: when was the last time you said these words ... when was the last time you said that to your spouse or your children or your parents? Many of us consider an admission of guilt as a sign of weakness or something that will be thrown back in our face. There is a story told about Gen. George Patton, the legendary general of WWII fame. He was once invited to dine at a press camp in North Africa. Wine was served in canteen cups, but thinking that he was being served coffee, Patton poured cream and sugar into his cup. As he stirred the sugar, the waiter told him that his cup contained wine – not coffee. Too proud to admit that he had made a mistake, Patton replied without hesitating, “I know. I like my wine this way.” And he drank it!

As Americans, as Jews, we would all be better off if our leaders learned from Pinchas of Koretz. And I have a feeling our homes would be better off if we weren’t too proud, too stubborn and sometimes, too stupid, to admit when we’re wrong. If we did, it would show that we are human ... and that might be a revelation to our loved ones. But it would show us at our best, at our strongest, at our most loving.

“*K’neged arbaah banim dibra Torah* – in regard to four children the Torah speaks. But this year we met the fifth child ... the stupid one. And he is not just out there in the world at large, sometimes he is in our homes as well. Let us all remember that we all need each other. Israel needs the United States and the United States needs Israel! Netanyahu needs Obama and Obama needs Netanyahu! Popes and rabbis need their congregants and their congregants need them! And all of us need our family, as our family needs us. So let all of us take to heart the words Sen. John McCain recently said on the Senate floor in regard to what took place in Jerusalem and Washington: “Now we’ve had our spat ... we’ve had our family fight ... and it’s time for us now to stop and get our eye back on the goal.” Yes, after all is said and done it is

pretty stupid being stupid. Let's be smart enough to learn from our mistakes and change for the better. That's when we will see fulfilled the Messianic dream we read of on Shabbat HaGadol: "*V'haishev leiv avot al bonim, v'leiv banim al avotem* ... He will turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers."

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