

**SHABBAT SERMON SHABBAT SERMON**  
**NOVEMBER 26, 2011**  
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*Four Dialogues*

One night a man got into trouble when his wife informed him that the day had gone by and he had forgotten her birthday. He told her how sorry he was, and said he would do anything to make up for it. She immediately said, “All right, tomorrow there better be something in the driveway for me that goes from zero to 200 in two seconds flat, or you’re in for it.” The next morning the wife awoke early, and looking out her bedroom window saw a small package in the driveway. She was a bit perturbed, as this was not what she was expecting. She went out and retrieved the package and upon opening it, found a handsome brand new bathroom scale! The funeral for her husband took place earlier this week.

According to the dictionary, a dialogue is “an exchange between two people of ideas or opinions on a particular issue, with a view to reaching an amicable agreement or settlement.” But not every dialogue – as we just heard – works out that way. On this Thanksgiving weekend I want to draw your attention to four dialogues that have received attention in recent weeks, and see what we can learn from them.

The first dialogue took place at the beginning of the month, at the Group of 20 economic summit that took place in France. There was a conversation held between our President Obama and France’s President Sarkozy. The conversation was meant to be private but inadvertently a microphone had been left open, and reporters heard the following conversation: Sarkozy, speaking of Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, says, “I can’t stand him. He’s a liar.” To which Obama replies, “You’re tired of him? What about me? I have to deal with him every day.” Of course, anyone who follows world affairs was not shocked to hear the words of this dialogue. But I must say that when I heard them, I felt sorry for Sarkozy and Obama. Both of them are facing difficult re-elections so if there are any two world leaders trying to convince the Jewish people that

they are our friends, it is Obama and Sarkozy. And the truth is that Sarkozy is the friendliest French President toward Israel that our people have known in the last half century. Compared to everyone since DeGaulle, this is already a friend. But to call Netanyahu a liar? I don't know what he had in mind. What I do know is that Nickolas Sarkozy is himself a walking lie. It is reported that he is something like 5 foot 5 or 5 foot 6. Now, I know a leader at that height who feels very good about himself. Of course, I'm talking about Napoleon! But not Mr. Sarkozy! It is reported that he always wears platform shoes. And perhaps I would, if that were the only way I could kiss first lady Carlo Bruni! But the platform shoes are not enough. His official entourage carries around a variety of platforms for him to stand on when he speaks so that he can look like this. (Stand on platform.) And he calls Netanyahu a liar!

And poor President Obama – nebech. He so wants the Jews to consider him a friend. And recently he has made some very friendly statements. But then he goes and puts his foot in his mouth! Some say that what Obama said wasn't so bad when he said about Netanyahu, "You're fed up with him? I have to deal with him every day" ... it could be read to mean that he was just brushing Sarkozy's comment aside.

I don't know, but I'm prepared to give the President a pass on this one. I have enough against him. And his conversation with Sarkozy included his criticism of the French vote in favor of the Palestinians joining UNESCO. And besides, what Obama said to Sarkozy sounds a little like what God once said to Abraham. There is a medrash that tells us that Abraham used to welcome pagans to his home and after giving them lodging and food, would encourage them to recite a blessing to the one God. One day a pagan ate by him, and instead of praising the one God, he praised the god of the pagans. And Abraham immediately threw him out of the house. That night Abraham had a dream in which God appeared to him and said, "You did wrong with him, Abraham. I have put up with that pagan for 80 years ... you could have put up with him for one night!"

And so, if President Obama has no choice but to put up with Mr. Netanyahu, I guess I have no choice but to put up with *him*! But he and Sarkozy should learn from today's Torah portion where we find Isaac and Esau planning Isaac's blessing to him, and the Torah tells us: "*V'Rivkah shomaat b'daber Yitzchok el Esau b'no* – and Rebecca heard what Isaac spoke to Esau, his son." You always have to watch what you say. You never know who is listening. All of us should remember what we are taught in the Pirkei Avot – the Ethics of our Fathers: "Ponder on three things and you will not come to sin ... know what is above you: a seeing eye, a hearing ear and all your deeds are set down in the record."

There was another dialogue that took place in recent weeks where the two participants should have taken these words to heart, and that was a conversation that was recorded in 1972 after Prime Minister Golda Meier appealed to President Richard Nixon to help the Jews of the Soviet Union achieve their freedom. The Nixon administration wanted to maintain "quiet diplomacy" on this matter, which meant doing little, if anything, so as not to "rock the boat" on the détente they were establishing with the Russians. Recent recordings show that two of Nixon's aides expressed their great displeasure with the Jews' attempt to pressure the administration to be more forceful for Soviet Jewry. One of his aides, Henry Kissinger, said, "Is there a more self-serving group of people than the Jewish community?" Another Nixon advisor, Leonard Garment responded, "None in the world." In case you didn't notice, both were Jewish. Kissinger's negative comments come as no surprise. In fact, by now it is hard to find many positive comments from Henry Kissinger about his people. But to refer to us as being "self-serving" ... this, the people who have made their mantra the words, "*Tikkun Olam* – repairing the world." It is this concept that has put Jews at the forefront of most every social activist program, from civil rights to grape pickers to fighting apartheid in South Africa ... no other people in proportion to its size has given more to humanity. For one of our own to refer to us as "self-serving?"

And Leonard Garment? His mother kept a kosher home and lit Shabbas candles. Growing up as a youngster, he and his friends formed a group called “The Seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” And while his father was not a very religious man, Garment writes in his biography, “My father had contempt for Jews who retain no Jewish identity at all ... he called them *goys* or favor currying *nebbishes*.” He, too, considered us “self-serving?”

You know, we are always talking about the anti-Semites in this world, but we should confront the reality that some of the worst things said about Jews are said *by* Jews! Sometimes our greatest threat comes from our very own. Our forefather, Jacob, learned this when at the end of today’s Torah portion, fleeing a threat on his life from his brother Esau, he runs to the house of Lavan. Lavan, after all, is *mischpocho* ... is family. Lavan is Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham’s nephew ... his mother’s brother. Lavan is his uncle. Who can you trust more than your own? But you know what? The name Lavan means “white” ... Lavan presented himself as being spotless; clean as a whistle, one you could put your life into his hands. But behind the veneer, if you reverse the letters of Lavan’s name, you get the word “Naval” which means “despicable.” Kissinger and Garment – we Jews had thought that with our own in the White House, our interests would be protected ... only to discover that they were joined with our worst enemies. Garment and Kissinger are still alive and now that their dialogue has been revealed, I bet they wish they had followed the words of the Ethics of the Fathers which teaches Rabbi Simeon used to say, “All my days I have grown up among the sages and I have found nothing better for a man than silence.” Yes, sometimes silence is better than dialogue.

But not always, as reflected in our third dialogue ... this one from today’s Torah portion. You remember the story ... how Rebecca discovers that Isaac is going to give the blessing to Esau and she knows that this is a mistake – that it should go to Jacob. And she says to Isaac – or maybe she called him “Ike” – “How can you think of giving that blessing to Esau? Can’t you see what kind of person he is? He would much rather hunt than study. If you want to continue our tradition and the tradition of your father

Abraham, then give the blessing to Jacob. Jacob is the one!” You remember this conversation? You don’t? You know why you don’t? Because it never happened! Rather than saying those words, Rebecca went through the whole deception of disguising Jacob to get the blessing. Not only did she not speak to Isaac about this, she never spoke to him about anything! The Torah never records any dialogue between them. And you know why? Explains the Netsiv, Rabbi Naftali Tsvi Berlin, one of the giants of Jewish scholarship, Rebecca never spoke to Isaac because she was “*maley busha u’fachad* – she was afraid of him.” She never felt that she was his equal. And that’s why, according to the Netsiv, as soon as she met Isaac, she veiled herself. She could not even look him in the eye as an equal.

It seems that Rebecca was the first in a long line of women down through the centuries – up to but not including our time – who have lived by the same rules that she did. You know the kind of woman ... the kind who, when she went out on a date with a boy and he told a joke that was dumb, or you had heard before, your mother told you to laugh nonetheless. Or if you went out with a boy who was short, what kind of shoes did your mother tell you to wear? And if you were on the honor roll or made Phi Beta Kappa, and he wasn’t ... what did your mother tell you to say about it? Did you ever hear this expression: “Don’t tell daddy ... he’ll be upset.” Women who played the game of “let him win” or “don’t show him that you are smarter than he is” ... these people are the direct descendants of Mother Rebecca. Well, that game had tragic reverberations in Rebecca’s time, and that game – thank God – is undergoing a radical change in our day.

As reflected in the fourth dialogue that recently made the news. It was a dialogue involving two Jewish women. When you hear of a conversation between two Jewish women, you think of the two of them *yentaing* on a park bench. Well, these two are not yentas and they were not speaking to each other on a park bench. They were speaking to each other on the most important bench in our country ... the Supreme Court of the U.S. which was hearing a case challenging the U.S. to change its policy regarding an America citizen born in Jerusalem. Presently, such a child has his birthplace

marked on his American passport as “Jerusalem,” period! The challenge was to have it say “Jerusalem, Israel.” Justice Elena Kagan, in discussing an option of putting “Palestine” on the Jerusalem passport said, “You have to be very old to say “Palestine.” To which another Jewish woman, her colleague, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, responded, “Not all that old!”

What a country ... a country that we as Jews should keep in mind on this weekend of Thanksgiving. Yes, there are people in this world like Sarkozy and Obama who say who knows what behind our backs. And there are Jews in this world like Kissinger and Garment who are dangerous to our people. But we live in a country where two Jewish women sit on the highest court of the land, joined with one Jewish man, Steven Breyer, making up 1/3 of the Supreme Court of the U.S.

There is a story told about a 7 year old boy in Sunday School. The teacher asks the class, “How many of you would like to go to heaven?” All but this one boy raise their hands. The teacher turned to that boy and said, “Does that mean that you want to go to hell?” And the child immediately replied, “No, it means that I like it right here!”

I, too, like it right here ... in the good old U.S. of A. And I hope you do, too! And in this spirit, on this Thanksgiving weekend, let us continue our dialogue with God with the words of our daily prayer with a full heart, “*Modim anachanu lach* – we give thanksgiving to you, O Lord” ... “*v'al nisecha sh'bchol yom imanu* – for all the wonders that our daily with us.” And let us say, “Amen.”

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