

# Parshat Toldot - Torah From The Holy Land

*Written by Sam Blustin*

## Torah: Let's Talk About Israel

A few weeks ago, we toured Masada, the impressive Herodian fortress made famous as the last stand of the Jews in the Jewish-Roman War. At this site, we discussed three different narratives of Masada: the narrative of the rebels as told by Josephus, the story the archeology tells, and the story of how Masada became a symbol for the modern State of Israel. This later story, which served as a rallying cry for early Zionism (“*Shenit M'zadah lo tipol*” - The second Masada shall not fall, using Masada as a metaphor for Israel), has begun to go out of fashion as Israel has settled into statehood. This vision of Israel hanging on by a thread, however, is still very prevalent in American Jewish circles. The idea that due to Israel's fragility we cannot criticize it or hope for a better future for all inhabitants of the land has created a relationship with Israel for many young Jews that is impossible to sustain. To truly have a deep relationship, we must be able to sit down and talk with each other when there are problems.

Rav Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (1816-1893), also known as the Netziv, comments on the difference in the relationship of Isaac and Rebecca from the rest of our ancestors. Rebecca's “relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca” (Commentary to Gen. 24: 65). This lack of communication had dire results for the family. Isaac was incensed at Jacob's betrayal. Cain resolved to kill Jacob after his father's death. Rebecca, in fear, had to send her favorite child away for dozens of years. The family was torn apart in a way that would never be repaired.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments that “such is us the human price we pay for a failure to communicate. The Torah is exceptionally candid about such matters, which is what makes it so powerful a guide to life: real life, among real people with real problems. Communication matters. In the beginning God created the natural world with words: ‘And God said: Let there be.’ We create the social world with words. The Targum translated the phrase in Genesis 2, ‘And man became a *living* soul’ as ‘and man became a *speaking* soul.’ For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships only exist because we can speak. We can tell other people our hopes, our fears, our feelings and thoughts.” ([Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](#))

The same is true when it comes to our relationship with Israel. In order for the Israeli project to be sustainable for generations, we must learn how to express our hopes and our fears. We must have a conversation about the values with which we approach our relationship to Israel, and we each must put forth a vision for the society that we wish the Jewish State to be. And no matter where we may be, we must work to make that vision a reality. But it only begins when we can have a candid conversation with each other, listening, pushing, and critiquing, out of a deep love and desire for our State to be the best it can be. The warning in our texts is clear: If we are afraid to speak about our problems, the consequences could be far worse.

## T'fillah: And the Blessing One Spoke (Baruch She'amar)

As we saw above, communication, or rather lack of communication, plays a central role in this week's parasha. It's the words that we speak, or choose not to, that can have immense power, and we see this in the Beginning. The entire universe was created with "And God spoke: Let there be...". All that is in this world, all the stuff that life is made up of, was created from these initial words. *Baruch She'amar v'haya haolam*, Blessing be the one who spoke and the world was. Every morning we begin the P'sukei D'zimra service with this awesome statement. Harkening back to those original words, it's an important reminder that the words we're about to offer in praise, in prayer and throughout the day, can both be blessings and curses. Each word that comes from our mouths has the potential to create and destroy worlds. When you come to this prayer in the morning t'fillot, consider using it as a natural stop and focus on your voice. Be cognisant of how it feels as the vocal chords vibrate, creating voice. And let the power give us pause, each word emanating intentionally from our mouth.

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