

Drasha/ Sermon: Parshas Berashis "Every Jew is Needed"

Rabbi Ze'ev Smasom, 2014, 5775

It was early May 2010, and David Nesenoff was at home staring at his computer screen. A Conservative rabbi for 20 years, David understood that the world needed him and that the Jewish people needed him. David paused for a moment of deep introspection when he evaluated life and pondered his purpose, like we all do on occasion. He knew he was needed, but didn't quite know what for.

At the time, the Land of Israel was on David's mind. He and his wife had recently returned from Israel. And since he felt that the Jewish people needed him, he decided that he wanted to do something for Israel. David would make small video snippets of Jews talking about Israel. He would ask, "Any comments on Israel?" and they would say how much they like the spirituality, or the felafel, or the archeology, or the beaches. And then he would put the short pro-Israel comments on his website, RabbiLive.com, and presto, everyone would watch his felafel videos. And things, somehow, would be better for Israel.

Meanwhile, David's Jewishly-involved teenage son, Adam, was up in his room, also busy.

That May, Adam called up the White House and requested to attend the President's upcoming Jewish Heritage Celebration. The White House media office was kind to provide press credentials for Adam, his friend and for dear old Dad. So David took time out from his busy schedule of contemplating how the Jewish people needed him, and drove from New York with the two teenagers to celebrate Jewish Heritage Month with the president. Maybe this would be a good place, David thought, to find a group of Jews to ask his "Any comments on Israel?" question and put a spotlight on his precious homeland.

David Nesenoff clearly felt that every single Jew needed? Is that true? You betcha.

There are not many Jews in the world today. We represent less than a fifth of a per cent of the population of the world. For every Jew alive today there are 100 Muslims and 183 Christians. We are a tiny people. We always were. Moses said so, 3,300 years ago. "Not because you are numerous did G-d love you or choose you, because you are the smallest of all nations." (Deut. 7:7)

Have you ever wondered why are we so small? One reason, of course, is the history of Jewish persecution, of which the Holocaust was the greatest but by no means the only tragedy. Many Jews died because they were Jews.

Another reason, and a good one, is that we never sought to convert the world. Had we done so, there would be more Jews. But we believed and still do, that you don't have to be Jewish to have a relationship with G-d or get to heaven. We're even tougher than the Marines. We're not even *looking* for a few good men! That is one of Judaism's most beautiful beliefs.

We aren't many -- so every Jew counts. Now, let's return to the David Nesenoff story.

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In late May, 2010, David and the two teens made it to Washington D.C., and attended President Obama's first press conference. Later they noticed Helen Thomas, dean of the White House Press Corps, walking toward them. David gave his son and his friend a quick rundown: She's one of the most famous reporters in the world, and had been covering the White House since the times of Eisenhower and Kennedy. She was the only member of the press to have a designated seat of her own—front row, center, in the White House briefing room.

Helen Thomas was a journalist for 60 years, and David Nesenoff was a journalist for 60 seconds; so he figured it was time they met. So they stopped her and exchanged pleasantries. Then with camera rolling, David asked Helen Thomas, "Any comments on Israel?"

"Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine," she said.

Rabbi David asked her a follow-up question. *"Where should they go?"*

"Home!"

"Where's home?" he asked.

"Poland and Germany," Helen Thomas said.

Rabbi David went back to New York with the video, and with the help of his son, posted it on his website later that week just before Shabbos. But before I tell you what happened next, let me give you some context.

Earlier that same week something happened in the Middle East that brought Israel into the spotlight. Israeli soldiers boarded a flotilla of boats from Turkey that were bent on defying the security blockade of the Gaza Strip. The "peace activists" on one of the boats beat the Israelis with metal rods and attacked them with knives. Several of the activists were shot in self-defense during the confrontation.

The whole world was against Israel. Helen Thomas stood in the White House, inches in front of the president, before the entire international press corps, and said, "It was a deliberate massacre by Israel against peace activists on the high seas."

Now, back to our story. Just before Shabbos the Helen Thomas video was posted. When Shabbos concluded, David turned on the computer to see if anyone had looked at the video. There were over 700,000 views. By Sunday it went viral, into the millions.

At a time when the events of the flotilla were fueling rabid anti-Israel and anti-Semitic comments, David's video cleared the air. Helen Thomas was forced to resign in shame, and her co-author and agents dropped her. She was banished from the White House; her name was removed from the front-row seat and from various awards throughout the country.

Every media outlet in the world converged on David Nesenoff, the good, the bad and the ugly. They all wanted to speak with the man who had recorded the video that led to the professional

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and personal demise of the renowned Helen Thomas. Suddenly, David felt not only needed by the Jewish people, but saw what he was needed for. He understood yet a third reason why there are so few Jews in the world.

This third reason is hinted at in a strange story in the book of Judges. It's set more than 3,000 years ago. In the days before there was a king in Israel, G-d tells Gideon, the charismatic Jewish leader at the time, to go and fight the Midianites, who have been attacking Israel.

Gideon assembles an army of 32,000 soldiers. "Too many," says G-d. "Tell everyone who wants to, to go home." 22,000 do so. Now he has only 10,000 men. "Still too many," says G-d. He tells Gideon to take them to the river, see how they drink water, and send home all those who bend down to drink. 9,700 do so, and he sends them home. Now there are only 300 left, a ridiculously small number with which to fight a war. "Now go and fight," he tells Gideon. They do, and they win. In this story lies the secret of Jewish smallness; every Jew counts, and every Jew can make a tremendous difference.

At the point in his life of the Helen Thomas video, David Nesenoff had begun to daven at a local Chabad. He asked someone who knew the Lubavticher Rebbe and had great knowledge of the Rebbe's teachings for advice what the Rebbe's message would be in this situation. David was besieged with interview requests, and wanted an appropriate message he could share with all the national news stations and media outlets that wanted to talk with him. The rabbi said that if the Rebbe were alive, he would tell David the following:

If you have a friend and you don't see him for a little while, he is still your friend. But if you don't see him for 50 years, you can't be sure if he is still your friend. But if your child goes away for a little while, he is still your child; and if your child goes away for months or even years, he is still your child. And if, G-d forbid, you don't see your child for 50 years, he is still your child.

"We are not the friends of Israel. We are the children of Israel. We were away for a few hundred years in Egypt, or a thousand years in Persia, or Spain, or North America . . . we were away for a few years in Auschwitz. But we are still the Children of Israel.

"Israel and the Children of Israel are one. It doesn't matter where or when you are born and live, or what language you speak; we are always the Children of Israel. We and Israel exist because of each other; it is G-d-given. The Jew walking on the street in New York, whether or not he even knows or cares about Israel, is alive because of Israel, and Israel exists because of him.

David Nesenoff took the Rebbe's words to heart, and made it a central theme of the message he shared with millions. In the process he brought about a tremendous Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of G-d's name), and accomplished something great.

Helen Thomas told David Nessenoff, "Go home. " And he did. Last year his son Adam studied at a Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and this year he is studying at a yeshiva in NJ. Last Sukkot he built *sukkahs* in Guatemala. On Pesach he delivered matzahs and conducted a Seder for Jews deep inside Cuba. His daughter Shira is a student at a Chabad seminary in Montreal.

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The story of the Jews is a story where G-d tells the world that a nation need not be big to be great. Small groups can make a large difference. Even one Jew can change the world. Which is why Jews have contributed to most fields of human endeavour out of all proportion to their numbers.

And isn't this a universal lesson, taught in this week's Torah portion, Berashis?

Only one human being was created in order to teach that one who destroys a single soul, Scripture regards him as if he destroyed an entire world, and one who saves a single soul, Scripture regards him as if he saved an entire world. The ramification of this, the Talmud says, is: "Therefore, each and every person must say, *bishvili nivra ha'olam*, 'for my sake was the world created.'"

But that places an enormous responsibility on each of us. The future of Judaism is in our hands. And to a people as small as ours, every life makes a significant difference. Every loss is a tragedy.

To someone feeling alienated from Judaism, and from the Jewish people, I say: Don't leave. Don't give up. Don't abandon your faith, your people, your history, your heritage. Stay and contribute. Stay and argue. Stay and bring the Jewish world a little closer to what it ought to be. It's an honor to be a Jew. Wear that honor with pride, and show it to be an honor by the way you live.

If you're so inclined, go out and video people, asking what they think about Israeli felafel. You never know what might happen! But one thing we know for sure: Every single Jew is needed, and every Jew can make a tremendous difference.