

## **Shabbat Parashat Vayera 5784**

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### **God Forbid**

You may recall the old saying that eskimos have hundreds of words for snow. Whether or not it's true, the point is that since eskimos are ostensibly surrounded by snow a whole lot more often than many others, they had the opportunity for language to develop in a way that described this constant reality for them in a way that was broader than those who did not.

Our parasha kind of, sort of introduces an idea that the Jewish people would become so familiar with that we also developed many ways to express it. Not hundreds, but I am going to guess we have more than your average number of ways of saying "gosh I hope that doesn't happen." And just like snow and eskimos, we have these expressions because we have been in the position to envision dark tidings on the horizon, and to utter a simple prayer to God that God should allow for something better than whatever that is to happen instead.

If you are of a certain age then you know the least technical way of expressing this sentiment, which is through the rather pedestrian sentiment of "pooh pooh pooh". This can be to either not push your luck when something good happens, like my grandson into Michigan pooh pooh pooh - or to ward off something bad from happening to your grandson once he gets to Michigan. Yes Jews even have a way to put a damper on good news so we shouldn't seem either ungrateful or, more to the point,

expecting that to be all we ever experience, though we hope it will be.  
Pooh pooh pooh.

The expression you might not have heard of, because it is really tied only into specific communities that operate a bit differently than ours, is rachmana litzlan. This was very popular in the Yeshiva I attended, practically a go to. Usually in connection to the guys heading to Jerusalem to waste time by eating falafel or, you know, doing anything other than staying in the Yeshiva to study. To use it in a sentence, like in the spelling bee - you could leave and neglect your studying and not learn as much as you should, rachmana litzlan, or you could stay here sit down and keep learning. That kind of thing.

Another is chas v'shalom - it pretty much translates as God forbid though neither word means either God or forbid. You can pretty much envision any negative outcome and add to it the expression chas v'shalom, as in my friend has a doctor's appointment and he's worried that the news will be bad, chas v'shalom.

The last is based in our parasha and appears in the very story that Josh taught us about. When Abraham decides to be bold and opens a negotiation with God about destroying S'dom, he turns to God's attribute of justice and says shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly? And he says Chalilah l'cha, and again Chalila lach - we would say heaven forbid, God forbid that God should even be perceived to be acting in an unjust way, destroying the innocent along with the guilty. And from that Torah text

came the expression chas v'chalilah, God forbid something should take place that.

I was on an Israel trip orientation meeting and the facilitator was describing a scenario for someone getting to Israel not on the group flight. She said if you get to Israel and between the time you arrive and the time you meet the group chas v'chalila a siren goes off then here is what you need to do. So it is still in somewhat common use.

And there is a use of this expression which is appropriate to remind ourselves of as Israel faces such a terribly difficult scenario. Which is chas v'shalom that even one unnecessary Palestinian death is caused due to forgetting the Jewish core value that every life is sacred and every loss of innocent life is a tragedy. At no point can or should we expect that anyone in a command position in Israel says by going after terrorists we will also be able to clean out some of their neighbors who probably support them anyway so what's the difference. It is true that civilian lives have and will be lost because of the diabolically dangerous ways that Hamas puts people in harm's way. It is unavoidable but we can't ever welcome that; it's not us, it's not Israel and it cannot ever be.

Chas v'chalila that the death of even an enemy should be celebrated or glorified. Those who have risen up against this do not hold this value dear, they just don't. There is a tremendous difference between an army that goes out of its way to prevent unnecessary loss of civilian life in the course of attacking legitimate military targets, and those who aim missiles indiscriminately toward civilian populations hoping and even praying that they will break through the iron dome to kill as many people as possible

and if they are Jewish even better. We dare not become anything like Israel's enemies in this way, in thought, word or deed.

As I said from the first days of this war the tide of sympathy and support will turn and calls for cease fires and balanced use of force and stopping the fighting when casualties have evened out on both sides would be called for in earnest and they have. Israel's leadership has declared this will not happen, they will not put their citizens at risk of being victim to those who will take a pause as an invitation to re-arm and to plan for more devastation of the truly innocent. It is a hard calculus with so many hostages in the very definition of harm's way. It gets harder as the world forgets what Israel experienced on October 7th. Israel fights to prevent that being experienced ever again at the hands of those for whom Jewish blood spilled is somehow considered something to celebrate, an expression and fulfillment of their sad and destructive purpose.

In his talk Josh Gray said: Abraham being a compassionate person pleads with God claiming that good and innocent people may be unjustly killed and therefore don't deserve to die. I agree - many who die or are injured or displaced in this war don't deserve that. In the coming week I'll have the honor of visiting victim's families, family members of those being held hostage, and those whose lives have been upended in these last weeks. I'll tell them we've been praying for them, that we will do all we can to support them, and that we share their vision, hope and dream of an Israel at peace, may it come sooner than anyone can imagine. Amen and am yisrael chai.