

ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה.

And Yaacov went out from Be'er Sheva and he went toward Charan.

Just one year ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find anyone who didn't want to go out, in some way, from Be'er Sheva. One year ago, last November, residents of that city emerged from the suffocation of their safe rooms and bomb shelters after a week of consistent presence in them - though not without trepidation about when rockets would start flying again toward their city from Gaza. Many residents wanted to get out, to escape the rocketed Negev for the greater momentary safety of other parts of Israel. I remember, during the midst of the episode, my cousins welcomed their entire family from Be'er Sheva for Shabbat in Modi'in, in the low hills of Central Israel.

Ultimately, permanently, Yaacov wants to be in Be'er Sheva. So do its current residents. But, while the rockets are flying, like our patriarch Yaacov, most would prefer to be in safer territory. Away from the spectre of war and the dangers of violence and terror. Esav is so terribly shocked by the bitter conflict with and betrayal by his brother that he too leaves the frightful scene of Be'er Sheva, for a good long twenty years, to burn off his anger towards his brother.

Be'er Sheva, obviously, is not unique. Israel -- all of it, north, south, east and west -- is perpetually embattled and within range of rocket fire. The only way to escape Israel's heat, danger and wars is to leave, to take a reprieve -- for days, months, even years at a time -- only to be drawn back by its magnetic force as our national home. You ask any American Israeli, even a long-time resident of the United States, where his or her home is, and they will look eastward.

Yaacov returns to the land soon enough, but this week he leaves. He sets a precedent for us -- it's a legitimate Jewish choice not to live in the land of Israel. He makes that choice, for twenty years, and he models for us the productive life of a Diaspora Jew. He starts a career, finds a spouse (more than one, in fact), and builds a communal clan from inside out. Yaacov build relationships with the local population, both informally and on paper -- recognizing and separating the complicated worlds of the personal and the business.

And, along the way, Yaacov struggles to maintain his religious identity and that of his clan. It's not easy, and the temptations are everywhere, as we see through Rachel's obsession with Laban's mandrake idols.

Likewise, we American Jews choose to live beyond Israel's physical boundaries, for most of us on a permanent basis. We follow the admirable lead of Yaacov the Diaspora citizen. We Jews pick ourselves up proudly wherever we go in the world, and wherever we have gone. We invest in our local context, make lives for ourselves, develop careers, get married, have children. We educate our children, pick ourselves up by our boot straps, and address our communal responsibility to help others do the same. We adroitly navigate the economic culture of our locales and make the tough, complicated decisions of the everyday marketplace -- figuring out, in Yaacov's parlance, what sheep we ought to herd and which we ought to deal away. Savvy, appropriately guarding our own needs, yet interacting with all that society offers, we have taken Yaacov's model of Diaspora living and followed it, here in the United States.

And, like Yaacov and his clan, we struggle with mixed success to resist the temptations of the local cultural idols as we seek to create a viable American Jewish identity.

Yaacov, however, does not leave life at that. Yaacov could easily stay in Charan, and rest comfortably with the life he's made. But he knows his spiritual destiny, and the destiny of his clan, is tied to the land of Canaan. So, against all good economic sense, he leaves Cha-

ran and returns to Canaan. A true-to-life modeler for the challenge of *chazara*, return to the land of Israel, he is filled with angst about his decision, as with his decision to leave Canaan in the first place. The conflict animated by his vision of angels going up and down the ladder is reenacted by his fight with the angel. He has a Jewish *kup* -- a normatively guilty, complicated Jewish mind. Decisions, Yaacov teaches us, are not easy, especially when it comes to Jewish identity and the land of Israel.

Now, am I advocating that we all pick up and make aliyah tomorrow? No. Yaacov would not want us to do that. Monumental decisions like that require years of thinking, not impulsivity. What we are doing here in America, and at B'nai Israel, is Jewish, very Jewish, and is doing Jewish life proud in so many respects. What I am advocating is that we continue to do vis-a-vis Israel what, reminded of the response in the Jewish community every time there is conflict in Israel, I believe we are already doing quite well.

And that's responding to the magnetic force of Israel in our lives in other ways. Comfortable in our lives here, we don't have to visit, we don't have to pay attention to what's going on there, we don't have to read the papers, we don't have to contribute to Israeli tzedakot. But we do -- and it is inspiring to me.

Whenever conflict erupts, I'm inspired by the intensity of the American Jewish community's concern about the conflict and by people's yearning to do something, anything, productive in response. I've felt that as a professional advocate for Israel. I've felt that by reading the constant stream of emails informing me about the latest goings-on in the conflict of the moment. I've felt that by seeing people recommit to their Zionism, engage in peaceful protests and contribute to Israeli tzedakot. And I've felt that by listening to the words of struggle of those who desperately want to feel connected to Israel in its times of crisis.

We are a community doubted some times by others -- and may I daresay, by ourselves -- in the passion of our commitment to Israel. Moments of conflict in in Israel remind me that

that commitment is still there in force, and is perhaps growing in the American public square more broadly. We each may want different specific things for our Israel, have our own pet concerns about which problems Israel needs to address as it seeks to become that light unto the nations that we want it to be. But most of us, quite purely, share the dream of peace and security for Israel. We are ohavei Yisrael, lovers of Israel, and that love can never be broken.

Let us continue to engage emotionally and continuously with Israel's fate and day-to-day challenges, not just in its moments of military conflict. Make every effort to understand what it is to live as an Israeli in Israel. Imagine what it is to have 15 seconds to make it to a bomb shelter before a rocket lands. Connect with tzedakot that are doing the holy work of making Israel a better place for all its residents. Involve yourselves in one of the many vital Israel-related organizations and activities in the Greater Detroit area that operate in this community with outsized success relative to the size of our Jewish population -- ORT, Magen David Adom, Teen Mission 14, and many others. Connect politically with the political stripe of your choice in Israel -- and there are many. Invest in its public policy debates, and articulate what you think. Today, for example, what do you think about America's engagement of Iran? Which strategy, stiffening or relaxing sanctions, makes better sense as we seek to reduce Iran's nuclear threat to Israel? Become as much of a virtual citizen of Israel as you can. Make it a priority to visit.

Advocate for Israel. And advocate for ourselves as Diaspora Jews. Yaacov does in his 20 years in Galut. Last year, we reminded ourselves what exactly we can do as American Jews, here in Galut. 25 years ago, 250,000 of us demonstrated in Washington, DC, for the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate as they wish. Our advocacy over the course of decades helped make the world change for Soviet Jews, helped redesign Israel's demographic map and helped reshape American foreign policy. We are not bit players on the world Jewish stage - - we are quite important actors.

We, as American Jews, can escape Israel forever if we choose. Most of us, thank God, choose not to. We, like Yaacov in Charan, have chosen to lead Jewish lives in the Diaspora. But we respond to the pull of Israel's magnetic force -- as if we really feel we have the choice -- and do everything but follow Yaacov back to that land. Our demonstration of identification with Israel is good for us, and it is good for Israel, and may God enable us to strengthen it, even when the moments are not so acute as they are when conflict erupts.

And, by the way, what's the best way to keep connected to Israel? It's to be right here, in community, in prayer, together, as we recite prayers that draw us closer to Israel and Jerusalem, and as we hear our national story about our ancestors in the land.

Shabbat shalom.