

# A Land of Short Wars

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

*The Advantage of being a Small Nation.*

## Rabbi Lau's Visit

In 1974, just after the Yom Kippur War, the Jewish Agency approached Rabbi Yisrael Lau and asked him to travel to the United States. What happened was that when the war broke out, the Chasidic community in New York rallied remarkably to support the soldiers, and the agency wanted to leverage this momentum to establish a connection between Israel and the religious community in New York. They didn't want to send a political figure; they specifically wanted a rabbi to address them 'in their language.'

Rabbi Lau, who had never been to the United States before, agreed to the mission. They discussed how he would be compensated for the demanding task of delivering five speeches every day for a month. Instead of asking for money, Rabbi Lau requested they arrange for him meetings with important Jewish leaders during his first visit to the U.S. His top priority was a private meeting with the Rebbe, and he considered that the payment for his trip to New York.

Upon arriving in New York, Rabbi Lau got a message about meeting the Rebbe at midnight in March. The Rebbe usually met people individually several times a week, starting in the evening and lasting late into the night. As he watched people enter and exit the Rebbe's room in quick succession, he thought the meeting would be brief, but it turned out to be more than two hours long.

Their conversation focused on educational matters. At that time, Rabbi Lau was teaching Jewish studies in high schools in Tel Aviv, and education was a topic of great importance to the Rebbe.

But then, the Rebbe turned to Rabbi Lau and said, "I want to understand something. As you know, Jews are a people of revolutionaries. In every revolution in the world, Jews have always been at the forefront, whether it's the Bolshevik revolution or any other revolution. Jews never accept the status quo; they always fight for change.

“So,” asked the Rebbe, “right after the Yom Kippur War, there were elections in Israel. How is it that the same leadership was chosen again? How is it that Golda, Dayan, and Galili were re-elected? One would expect that after the failure that led to the Yom Kippur War, the people of Israel would need to change the leadership, but that didn’t happen here.”

Rabbi Lau didn’t know how to answer this question, but he shared with the Rebbe a story that he experienced during the Yom Kippur War.

## **We Just Want Peace and Quiet**

The war started on Yom Kippur, a Saturday. Rabbi Lau was at home on that quiet Sunday evening, with blackout rules keeping the streets dark and quiet. Out of the blue, he got a call from a wedding hall owner in Tel Aviv.

The owner explained that a young couple needed to get married that night and didn’t want to delay it. The groom had a short 12-hour leave from the army, and they were waiting for a rabbi, but he did not show up. Perhaps he thought they would not hold the wedding during the blackout then in effect, or maybe he thought that everyone was in the army, fighting, and no one was in the mood for a wedding. The owner asked him to come in his place, and Rabbi Lau agreed without hesitation.

When he arrived at the hall, which was set up for a big celebration with 250 guests, there were only 15 people, including a teary-eyed bride. The mood wasn’t festive, but Rabbi Lau quickly conducted the marriage ceremony and officiated the chuppah.

As Rabbi Lau was leaving, a waitress came over. She shared her worries about her young son in the army. She told him that if her son didn’t come back, she felt she had no reason to live.

Taken aback by her words, Rabbi Lau argued that such sentiments were not in line with Judaism. He emphasized that giving up on life, no matter the circumstances, was forbidden. The waitress responded, saying, “You’ll understand me because you’re a Holocaust survivor.” She went on to share her own story.

After the war, she and her husband, both Holocaust survivors, met in Lodz. They

got married, immigrated to Israel in 1948, and just as they arrived, the War of Independence broke out. He was drafted into the army at the same time she was pregnant. Her husband never returned from the war, and by the time their son was born, he was already an orphan.

Her son was named after three people: her father, her husband's father, and her husband. Since then, he became the only close family she had in the world. "If he doesn't come back," she reiterated to Rabbi Lau, "I have no reason to live." The rabbi comforted her, and ultimately the soldier returned home and began a family of his own.

Rabbi Lau finished his story, and said, "Perhaps we are a bit tired of revolutions, Rebbe. We have no more strength for such things. How much can we fight? How long? Perhaps this waitress is a living example of what my generation went through. Who does the rebbe expect will go out into the streets again with flags to start revolutions? All we want now is a little peace and quiet..."

Postscript: her son returned home happy and healthy, and established a nice Jewish family.

## **The Quick Jewish Wars**

Rabbi Lau related that story recently, and shared something interesting:

Throughout the world, wars usually take a very long time. World War II was five years long, the Vietnam War was ten years long—but the wars in Israel don't come even close to that. Israel has incredibly short wars.

In the Sinai Campaign in 1956, Israel conquered the entire Sinai—double the size of Israel—in just six days. In 1967, Israel conquered, Gaza, the Golan Heights and the West Bank and Jerusalem in just six days. Even the Yom Kippur War, which began as a catastrophic failure, was completed in eighteen days with a remarkable victory.

Wars in other countries seem incomparable; the war between Ukraine and Russia has been ongoing for two years already, with no end in sight... Israel has it different. G-d's hand does not allow Israel to get involved in endless wars; they end quickly, and they end in victory. We speak of them as if they are the greatest

tragedies and failures and catastrophes, but when compared to other nations, the picture looks quite different.

Why are we so different?

## The Argument

In this week's Torah portion, we read about an argument between a father and son, perhaps the only such argument that appears in the Torah.

Joseph is the ruler of Egypt, and he received word that his father is ill (this is, by the way, the first time the Torah tells us that someone is ill). When he hears the news, he gathers his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, and comes to visit his father—and asks him to bless them before he departs from this world.

What follows is a famous story of the Torah.

Joseph stands his sons in birth order; Menashe at Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim at Jacob's left hand. But Jacob switches his hands, putting his left hand on Menashe and his right on Ephraim. Trying to correct the situation, Joseph lifted his father's hands to move them back to the 'correct' position; "No, father, this one is the firstborn—put your right hand on his head." But his father insisted, and kept his right hand on Ephraim.

What exactly was the argument? Why did Jacob see it one way, while Joseph saw it differently?

The Rebbe once cited the explanation of the Kli Yakar on these verses (Asara B'Teves 5742. Hisva'aduyos v. 2 p. 660). He explains that there was an argument here; Joseph felt that Menashe, as the firstborn, deserved to receive the first blessing, as part of his first born rights which are given in the Torah. He definitely should not be placed secondary to his older brother.

But according to Jacob, G-d favors the younger brothers: Ishmael, the firstborn to Abraham, is disqualified, and Isaac is chosen. Esau, the firstborn to Isaac, is disqualified, and Jacob is chosen. Reuben, the firstborn to Jacob, is disqualified, and Joseph is chosen. Similarly, David is the youngest of Yishai's sons, and he is anointed king.

The Jewish people are beloved to G-d not because they are the greatest or the strongest, but precisely because they are small; "You are the smallest of nations..." As a reflection of that, Jacob wanted to place his right hand on Ephraim's head.

The Midrash adds that, consequently, the people of Israel, who are "the small," are counted according to the lunar months, as the lunar calendar depends on the small luminary, the moon. (Yalkut Shimoni Bereishis 1:16).

The Rebbe continued to explain that this is exactly our path to G-d. The vessel for receiving G-d's blessing is through humility, through smallness. When we pray with humility and a feeling of lowliness, we become vessels to receive the greatest blessings.

What happened in Israel over the past year was the exact opposite of humility. Every person was convinced that just he was correct and that the other side was traitorous. And when two sides are so equally and arrogantly convinced of their opinions, the results are difficult and tragic.

As soon as the war broke out, everyone suddenly remembered that we are one nation. The arrogance and the ego disappeared and what appeared in its wake was the Jewish soul, in all its beauty and splendor. And it is specifically that change that allows us to become vessels for the greatest possible miracles.