2 Excerpts from

A Year with the Sages: Wisdom on the Weekly Torah Portion
By Rabbi Reuven Hammer

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1. **Excerpt #1: Fear of Killing or Being Killed** (from Va-yishlaḥ - Jacob's Dilemma - Genesis 32:4-36:43)
2. **Excerpt #2: (for Yom ha-Atzmaut) - Land of Milk and Honey** (from Yom ha-Atzmaut, Deuteronomy 26:1-12)

Fear of Killing or Being Killed
By Rabbi Reuven Hammer

"Jacob was greatly frightened and troubled…" – Rabbi Judah b'reb Elai said, "Are not 'frightened' and 'troubled' the same thing? Rather it means: he 'was greatly frightened' that he might kill and 'troubled' that he might be killed. [Jacob] thought, "If he overpowers me he will kill me and if I overpower him, I will kill him!" Therefore he "was greatly frightened" that he might kill and "troubled" that he might be killed. - Genesis Rabbah 76:1-2

The verse stating that Jacob was afraid seems to have bothered the Sages. First of all they wondered why he should have been afraid when he had God's assurance that God would protect him. . In fact, he had been so awestruck by his vision of the stairway to heaven that he had proclaimed he was in the very abode of God and in the gateway to heaven. And he had indeed come safely through all the events in Laban's house, difficult as they may have been.

The Sages noticed that Moses also had been afraid. They concluded that the righteous are never truly at ease in this world. Are they justifying these fears? After all, if one sees someone else's army on the way, is it not normal to have fear, even if one believes that God will help? Or are the Sages saying that no one —not even the most righteous – should ever feel totally assured of not facing any troubles?

The other matter that bothered Rabbi Judah, a second-century Tanna (the early Sages prior to 200 CE) that lived in the Land of Israel, was the Torah's use of two similar words to describe Jacob's fear: one from the root to be afraid –*vayira*—and the other from the word for trouble —*vayetzer*. Assuming that each word has significance, he explains that two different things worry Jacob: There can only be two outcomes to his conflict with Esau – either Jacob kills him or he is killed by Esau – and he is terrified by either one.

One might have thought that, given their history, Jacob would be happy to be rid of Esau. Defeating him – i.e. killing him – might seem a good solution to his problems, but Rabbi Judah does not see it that way. Of course, Jacob does not want to die – who does? But he also does not want to kill, even if it is in self-defense. Was Jacob a pacifist? Hardly. Nor can one find justification for pacifism within Jewish teachings. Pacifism in such a context would imply surrendering one's very life to evil. Judaism, rather, teaches that you must kill the one who is

trying to kill you. But that does not mean that you have to make killing your goal. There should be some restraint, some hope that killing can be avoided. Rabbi Judah's interpretation of Jacob's fears and troubles makes this point.

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Although I have served in two armies, I have never been in combat. As a chaplain in the US Air Force I was prohibited from even learning how to fire a weapon, much less carry one. Later, at a more mature age, I served in the Israeli Army reserves, but not in a fighting unit. Therefore, I have no firsthand knowledge of what it means to be engaged in an endeavor where killing another human being, the enemy, is the goal.

Some of my children and grandchildren have faced this in their service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and I do not envy them. I am glad that the Israeli army has a code of ethics which limits unnecessary killing. The existence of cases in which soldiers have been convicted for killing terrorists when the terrorists were no longer threats is to the IDF's credit.

I did have one experience, however, which helped me to appreciate Jacob's dilemma. As a rabbinical student, I was one of a group of ten Americans who spent a year studying in Israel in 1955-56. At the time, there were many incursions of Palestinian terrorists into Israel resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. In the Spring our group volunteered to go to a kibbutz on the border with Jordan and help build needed defenses against possible incursions. During the day we dug trenches and erected barbed wire fences. At night from time to time we had guard duty.

The first time I was to guard, I was given a rifle. I had no training in shooting and had not the slightest idea of how to handle it. I was given a very rudimentary introduction and sent off to patrol a certain section of the kibbutz.

Late at night I suddenly saw a figure coming toward me, holding something and saying something I could not understand. As he came closer, I could see by his clothing that he was an Arab. I held up my rifle and was totally frozen. I think I told him to stand still, but he didn't and I thought – "Should I shoot? Shoot into the air?" Had I been trained, I might have known what to do and how to use that rifle. If he had a gun or even a knife I could be killed….. I hesitated….

And just then a member of the kibbutz came running to me. "It's OK," he said, "he's a friend, someone from the area we know." The kibbutznik explained that they had given this fellow a place to sleep for the night, and he was asking me for some kerosene for the lantern he was holding. They had simply neglected to tell me that he would be arriving. That neglect could have ended in catastrophe. Even untrained as I was, I might have shot an innocent man. I put down the rifle and could breathe again. But I returned to my room and I was as pale as a ghost.

Then I really understood Jacob's dilemma: what it means to feel fear – fear of killing and fear of being killed.

Land of Milk and Honey
By Rabbi Reuven Hammer

Rami ben Ezekiel once visited Bene-Brak. He saw goats grazing under fig trees. Honey was flowing from figs and milk ran from [the goats] and they mingled with one another. "Indeed," he said, "this is 'a land flowing with milk and honey!'"

Rabbi Jacob ben Dostai said, "It is three miles from Lod to Ono. I once went there early in the morning and was wading up to my ankles in fig-honey.

Our Rabbis taught: Even Hebron, the rockiest ground in the Land of Israel, was seven times more fertile that Zoan, the most fertile place in Egypt!

Rabbi Zera went up to the Land of Israel and could not find a boat to ferry him across the river [Jordan], so he crossed grasping a rope. When someone sneered at him…he replied, "Should I not rush to enter the place where even Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter?" - Ketubot 112a

These are but a few of the many sayings found in the Talmud praising the fertility of the Land of Israel and demonstrating the Sages' love for the land. The Sages often used extravagant language to emphasize that the Torah's words concerning the land were accurate; it was more fertile and more to be praised than any other land. Similar passages both in the Talmud and in ancient midrashim make the same point, going so far as to state that even the stoniest and least fertile part of Israel, namely Hebron, which was good only for a burial ground, was better than Zoan, the best part of Egypt. Unfortunately, these accounts are not exactly accurate, but on the other hand, the land is a good land which can sustain excellent crops when properly handled. And it does have both milk and date-honey in abundance.

The Sages also tell us the story of Rabbi Zeira, a third-century Sage from Babylonia, who, feeling discontented with his life in the Diaspora, left to study and teach in the Land of Israel. He was so impatient to reach the land that he could not even wait for the ferry to take him across the river. He contrasted himself to Moses and Aaron, who, for all their greatness, were never able to enter the land. Now that he was so privileged, how could he possibly wait even an instant?

This charming story emphasizes the importance of dwelling in the land and the idea that living there is a great privilege.

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Although we made aliyah to Israel as a family in 1973, my wife and I first visited Israel in the fall of 1955. As part of my Jewish Theological Seminary rabbinical training, I was permitted to spend a year in Jerusalem studying at the Hebrew University and participating in a special program the Seminary ran there.

As was common at that time, we did not come by plane but by ship. Together with another rabbinical student and his wife, we crossed the Atlantic and landed in France, traveled through Europe, and then in Italy boarded another ship that would take us to Haifa.

After a rather stormy voyage, we were due to arrive there early that morning. A bit like Rabbi Zeira, the four of us arose at dawn and stood on the deck to catch our first view of Israel. We were very excited when Haifa came into view and could hardly wait for the ship to dock.

Passport control was then a much simpler and more personal affair than it is now. We went into a shed of some sort. One man was there sitting behind a desk. He took my passport, looked at me, and, before he stamped it, said "*Ma Shlom Yehudi?"* – literally "Is all well with a Jew?" (thus, the Hebrew version of the well-known Yiddish phrase *Vos macht a yid*?). This simple greeting startled me for a moment. In the Diaspora the term "Jew" has pejorative

connotations. I was not used to being called "Jew" in such a positive and friendly way. I realized then what it meant to be in a land of our own, to be home. Many years later when deciding to come on Aliyah, I still recalled the deep impression that simple Hebrew greeting *Ma Shlom Yehudi?* had made upon me. I never forgot it.

A highlight of our year was Yom ha-Atzmaut. We watched as Israel's eighth Independence Day began with a ceremony dedicating a huge elaborate menorah, the symbol of the State, which had been erected in a small park near the building on King George Street housing the Knesset. (Now it stands near the monumental Knesset building in the government compound.) After that, a brief ceremony commemorating Israel's fallen soldiers was held.

Then we joined the hordes of people streaming into the center of Jerusalem, where everyone sang and danced throughout the night. This was not part of a planned celebration, but the extemporaneous outpouring of feeling on the part of Israelis who had struggled for so many years to achieve independence. They did not take it for granted.

Since the State was then so young, the exuberance of the celebration was less elaborate, but much more spontaneous than it has since become. Those celebrating the creation of a Jewish State for the first time in 2000 years were those who were responsible for making it happen — and those who had paid the price for it.

The next day, we travelled by bus to Haifa to view the official military parade. It was impressive to see the ranks of soldiers, both men and women, striding down the avenue. The idea of a Jewish army, defending a Jewish state was still a novelty and a source of pride for someone like myself who had never seen such a thing before. (Looking back, the military equipment so proudly displayed was nothing like what Israel has now, but it was enough to permit Israel's massive sweep into Sinai the following August in response to Palestinian terrorist incursions into Israel that had occurred over that entire year.) We returned to Jerusalem that night, tired but exhilarated by our participation in Yom HaAtzmaut in the place where it all happened.

Even though Yom HaAtzmaut in Israel is now much more elaborate, organized, and populated with events than it was in 1956, the newness and freeness of the celebration that year would be difficult to reproduce. Nevertheless, I still feel that of all the holidays in the Jewish year, Yom HaAtzmaut is the only one that must be celebrated in Israel in order to be truly realized. No matter what is done, nothing can compare with simply being there and sharing the day with others who also feel, and live, the importance of having achieved independence and renewal after 2000 years.