

**Torah Reflection on *Genesis 23:1-25:18* at the Shabbat Service  
Temple Israel, 1140 Governor Street, Springfield, Illinois  
November 22, 2024**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear friends in the family of Abraham:

A bishop, three priests, and two rabbis went to the Holy Land. If you are waiting for the punchline, this is no joke! In the summer of 2005, when I was Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, I travelled to Israel with three of my priest-friends and two rabbis whom I had gotten to know when we were part of the Catholic-Jewish Dialogue in Chicago for many years. The rabbis were Yehiel Poupko, Rabbinic Scholar for the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and Ira Youdovin, Executive Vice President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, who is now retired in Santa Barbara, California. It was a fascinating trip from which I learned a great deal about the Holy Land.

With me this evening are Edward Grossman and his daughter, Iris. Ed and I were classmates at DePaul University College of Law in Chicago, where we became best friends. While we were in law school, Ed and I collaborated with an Egyptian-American professor of law, M. Cherif

Bassiouni, in organizing a Jewish-Christian-Muslim interfaith service of prayer for peace. After graduating law school and being admitted to the Illinois bar in 1981, Ed and I co-founded the Chicago Legal Clinic to provide legal services for the poor on the south side of Chicago. Not only did we help thousands of people in poverty with their legal problems over several decades, but the collaboration of a Catholic priest with a Jewish lawyer in this project provided a living example of interfaith cooperation.

In my homily at our Cathedral in Springfield this past September 8<sup>th</sup>, I referred to a very compelling article that I read in the September 6<sup>th</sup> edition of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL about the plight of the Jewish people, not just in Israel, but here in the United States and throughout the world. Bearing the title, "The Jews Stand Unbowed – but Alone," the article summarizes an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy, a Jewish French philosopher and filmmaker, in which he draws attention to one of the six Israeli hostages murdered by Hamas the previous week, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, age 23. "Hersh was executed for being a Jew," Mr. Lévy says. "He was also American. Where is the collective rage in the U.S.A.? The collective grief? This indifference pains me." Mr. Lévy has met Hersh's parents, "the most resilient, compassionate, freedom-loving Americans." Why, he asks, has the

whole country “not rallied to wrap the Goldberg-Polins in their arms and carried them forward in their painful journey of mourning?”

After the attack on Israel by Hamas last year on October 7<sup>th</sup>, everyone realized “that there is no place in the world where Jews are safe.” Before October 7<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Lévy said, “in the worst hypothesis, if things turned bad for Jews in the West, there was Israel. . . . The shock was that even Israel could be more than unsafe—that it could, alas, be the place where the worst happens.”

The article goes on to say that “There was a second shock. Rather than provoke sympathy and compassion for the Jews, Hamas’s massacre liberated hate. ‘This, for me, was a very big surprise,’ Mr. Lévy says. ‘I expected at least a moment of real solidarity in the face of this enormous crime.’ Instead, the murderers were ‘blessed, excused and praised.’ The victims were ‘accused, cursed and held responsible for their fates.’ Even before Israel’s military response had begun in earnest, there was an ‘explosion of antisemitic demonstrations in New York and on campuses across America.’ Mr. Lévy saw the same in France, which devastated him.”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Lévy rightfully asks about the absence of collective rage and grief in the U.S.A. following the murder of an American citizen by Hamas. I told

our Catholic congregation at the Cathedral in Springfield that, as Christians and as Americans, we cannot be blind, deaf, or mute to the plight of our Jewish brothers and sisters. We must condemn the atrocities being committed by Hamas and pray for an end to the violence and antisemitism.

I sent a copy of my homily to Rabbi Poupko, saying in my email, "Having been born just a few years after the end of World War II, I never would have thought that the world would see such a widespread return of virulent antisemitism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is shocking to me and I felt I just had to say something. I fully support the right of Israel to defend itself. I hope more leaders start speaking out in defense of Israel and the Jewish people. Know that you still have a faithful friend in Springfield!"

Rabbi Poupko replied, "It was so very thoughtful of you to write. Even more so, the subject of your homily once again demonstrates what I continue to say throughout the American Jewish community: Judaism and the Jewish people have no better friend in the Christian world than the Roman Catholic Church." Rabbi Poupko added, "The parents of Hersh Goldberg Polen, John Polen and Rachel Goldberg, grew up with my children and were raised in the same schools and synagogues. Your homily is deeply moving, deeply devoted, and a profound act of real and authentic friendship."

I mention all of this to let you know that the Jewish community is not a stranger to me, and I highly esteem my connections to the Jewish community. As I said to Rabbi Poupko, I say to you: The Jewish community has a faithful friend here in Springfield!

It is providential that our Torah portion this evening from the *Book of Genesis* starts with the death of Abraham's wife, Sarah, and his securing a burial place for her, continues with the marriage of their son Isaac with Rebekah, and concludes with the death of Abraham, who is buried by his sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

As we know, the biblical roots of animosity between Jews and Arabs can be traced back to these two sons of Abraham. The first was Ishmael, whose mother was Hagar, the maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah. In their old age, when both Abraham and Sarah thought they were past child-bearing age, Sarah consented for Hagar to bear a son for Abraham so he could have an heir. Later, when Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac, she resented the presence of Hagar and Ishmael and asked them to leave. The Ishmaelites, as they and their people were called, became a nomadic nation who dwelt in the region that is now known as Saudi Arabia.

The name Israel comes from Isaac's son, Jacob, who was renamed "Israel" by God in the Bible. Israel's descendants were enslaved by the Egyptians for hundreds of years before settling in Canaan, which is approximately the region of modern-day Israel. So Jews were in the land of Israel somewhere between 1,600 to 2,000 years before the first Muslims. The original "Palestinians" were the Jews. The people we now call Palestinians were known as Arabs, and they have grown increasingly angry that what they considered their ancestral land was no longer theirs. As a consequence, their leadership has become increasingly hostile to Israel, maintaining their desire to annihilate the Jewish State. Israel has offered a two-state solution on several occasions, but the terms have never been acceptable to the Palestinian leadership. All of this culminated in the barbaric and horrific attack on Israeli citizens (the vast majority of whom were civilians) last year on October 7<sup>th</sup>, followed shortly thereafter by the Israeli incursion into Gaza with the stated goal of destroying Hamas (the Palestinian governing body) and rescuing the over 240 hostages taken in the attack. Although warned by Israel to vacate the area, many did not. Hamas uses civilians as "Human Shields," increasing the likelihood that civilians will be killed when Israel attacks. The use of human shields is a war crime as defined by the Geneva

Conventions. Israel requires the return of the hostages before they will agree to a ceasefire. Hamas will not release the vast majority of the hostages as they represent leverage. In response to the calls for a ceasefire, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recalled the Japanese bombing of the American base at Pearl Harbor in 1941, noting that the response of the United States was not a ceasefire, but a declaration of war, which was then fought until the Japanese and Germans surrendered.

World opinion is strongly divided about the current situation in Israel and Gaza, but many people believe Israel's response is disproportionate to the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack, primarily because of the number of civilian casualties. In the meantime, Hamas continues to refuse to accept the existence of Israel and seeks its annihilation.

What are we to make of all this? Our Catholic moral tradition has developed around this issue over the centuries to provide the moral framework we need. While we Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace and we always pray for peace, that does not necessarily mean that we must be pacifists. Saint Augustine developed a very well-reasoned system called the Just War Theory. The just war theory states the belief that war, while it is terrible but less so with the right conduct, is not always the

worst option. Important responsibilities, undesirable outcomes, or preventable atrocities may justify war. Saint Augustine, who lived from 354-430 A.D., was the first clear advocate of the just-war theory, drawing upon the theories of Cicero and Saint Ambrose. Augustine's account was picked up with minor emendations by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whose own rendering was normative for Catholic theorists from the Middle Ages.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lays out the conditions for just war in paragraph 2309:

- the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
- all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
- there must be serious prospects of success;
- the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.

Just war theorists distinguish between the *ius ad bellum*, the Latin term used to refer to being justified in going to war, and the *ius in bello*, which refers to right conduct in the midst of battle, after the war has started.<sup>2</sup>

The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good.

As the world watches the atrocities of war in horror, this does not mean that the situation is hopeless. As people of faith, we prayerfully entrust this situation to God, that His grace may eventually help enemies to overcome their human hostilities and live in peace.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tunku Varadarajan, "The Jews Stand Unbowed – but Alone: Bernard-Henri Lévy on how Hamas's Oct. 7 attack changed Israel and the world," *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, September 5, 2024, accessed online at [https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-jews-stand-unbowed-but-alone-war-hamas-hostages-50e5717c?st=q66vu6vyxc35r41&reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/the-jews-stand-unbowed-but-alone-war-hamas-hostages-50e5717c?st=q66vu6vyxc35r41&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink).

<sup>2</sup> Brian Orend, *The Morality of War* (Peterboro, Ontario: Providian Press, 2006), pp. 105–123; accessed online at [https://www.usna.edu/CoreEthics/Orend\\_Just\\_Conduct\\_in\\_War](https://www.usna.edu/CoreEthics/Orend_Just_Conduct_in_War).