We are living now during very difficult times, times that require our introspection, thinking, understanding, care, and concern.

I would like to divide my talk into two parts. The first consists of reflections on the notion of anti-Semitism, b’chlok, and the second consists of divrei chizuk to you, bnei Torah and bnei yeshiva, to help you deal with the difficulties that are confronting us especially now, today, as we begin the new zman. I want to help us engage with our Torah studies, and our lives in general, with integrity and with substance, in spite of everything that we are encountering in the world around us now.

My first point is that, historically, what we are facing is not new. As we begin to reflect on the situation confronting us now, it is important to understand that this is not a reality that we have never encountered before, even in the United States. As a matter fact, within the first few moments after Jews arrived here for the very first time, in 1654, we encountered anti-Semitism.

Peter Stuyvesant was the representative of the Dutch West India Company here in New Amsterdam, a settlement that later became New York. On September 22, 1654, shortly after the Jews first arrived here, he sent a letter back home to the ba’alabatim in charge of New Amsterdam to inform them that he felt strongly that the Jews do not belong there. He wrote:

The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant . . . to the people having the most affection for you: the Deaconry also fearing that owing to their present indigence they might become a threat.

This article is an edited transcript of a talk I delivered in the Fischel Beis Midrash at Yeshiva University on January 22, 2020. I have maintained the oral nature of the presentation, including the Ashkenazis pronunciation of Hebrew words.
charge in the coming winter, we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place and the land in general, deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart; praying also most seriously in this connection, for ourselves and also for the general community of your worships, that this deceitful race, such hateful enemies and blasphemers of [Christianity], not be allowed further to infect this new colony, to the detraction of your worships and the dissatisfaction of your worships’ most affectionate subjects.¹

Do you hear such language? This group of “deceitful,” “repugnant,” “hateful enemies” and “blasphemers” cannot be allowed “to infect” this beautiful olam ha-chadash called New Amsterdam! Jews show up in this city, are greeted with a shalom aleichem and told be-lashon nekiyah, “in a friendly way,” to get out of here; we don’t want you. The moment we arrive here we are met with derision and with rejection.

There is a history of anti-Semitism in the United States. Now is not the time to go into detail; I’ll mention just two other examples. In probably the most blatant official anti-Semitic act in American history, General Ulysses S. Grant implemented “General Order No. 11” in 1862, expelling all Jews from territories under his control.² Later, in the 1930’s, there was a Catholic priest by the name of Father Charles Coughlin who spewed vicious anti-Semitism on his radio show that had 20 million listeners.³

And so, what we are experiencing now is not new. This is something that, regretfully, we have had to deal with before, even in this country. Having said that, I would say that what we are facing today is especially disturbing because the situation had been much better and quieter for the last number of decades, baruch Hashem, more or less. And therefore, it behooves us to try to understand how we can react to what is going on now. It is particularly important for us as bnei Torah and bnei yeshiva to think about what we need to do to maintain our commitments, our learning, our talmud Torah and our yir’as Shamayim.⁴

Esav Sonei Es Yaakov

Anti-Semitism has been a part of the millennia-old Jewish experience long before Jews arrived in the United States. We annually recite the words in the Hagadah, שבכל דור ודור ימים שלעון ladumah, in every generation there were those who sought to destroy us. Peter Stuyvesant was not mechadesh a new he’arah; we already had to deal with this reality from the very dawn of our history. These words in the Hagadah are followed by a discussion of the Yaakov-Lavan encounter.⁵ But I want to focus primarily on the Yaakov- Esav encounter.

After having been separated for many years, Yaakov hears that Esav is coming toward him and he prepares himself for this encounter.

As it simply appears, as what the reader would normally think it means. Vayishakehu does not really mean vayishakehu, a word generally indicating that Esav expressed warm feelings to Yaakov that would normally be demonstrated by a kiss. In fact, it means something else. And Rashi presents two options.

The first is that, in fact, Esav did not really kiss Yaakov; rather, he just went through the motions. The second opinion is the one relevant to us. Rashi quotes Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who stated a principle, הלך ואתו שسوق שלועתليب크א, it is a halacha. What is more important to us than a halacha? We live our lives by halacha. It is well known, everybody knows, it is simply obvious, that Esav hates Yaakov and therefore, it is inconceivable that Esav kissed Yaakov. Of course he did not kiss Yaakov. The p’shat, or simple meaning, cannot be that he kissed Yaakov and therefore, says Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the dots on top of the word are meant to indicate that the real meaning is the opposite, that, in this case, Esav really did kiss Yaakov. At that moment, Esav’s mercy was aroused and he kissed Yaakov with all his heart. This time it really does mean literally vayishakehu.

What does this mean?

First, it is interesting to note that in commenting on this verse, the author of the Yalkut Shimon (Be-ha’alos’cha #722) formulates this phrase not הלך ואתו שسوق שלועתليبקר אינון, it is well known that Esav hates Yaakov, without the words halacha hi. But most sources do use the phrase halacha hi and this raises a question. How is the word halacha relevant here? Is the
fact that Esav hates Yaakov a halacha, a law? You’re not allowed to do it on Shabbos? You’re not allowed to eat it or drink it? This is not the kind of a language that we would normally associate with this kind of a statement.

Indeed, both R. Zevi Hirsch Chayis and R. Baruch Halevi Epstein point to a number of places in rabbinic literature where, in fact, the word halacha is used in a non-legal context, one that we would consider to be aggadah:

The word halacha can also refers to matters of Aggadah.

Maharat Chayis, Berachos 31a

Matters relating to the Jewish people and information about them can also be called “halacha.”

Torah Temimah, Bamidbar 27:21:35

Even something that is a devar aggadah can also be referred to as halacha.

But, even if it is possible to defend the use of the word halacha in such a non-legal or agadic context, why go out of your way to call Esav’s hatred for Yaakov a halacha? What is the significance of referring to it that way? Most striking in this context is a teshuva by Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 2:77) that addresses this question.

He was responding to Jews in England who claimed that their Jewish schools were not getting the kind of support from the English government that they felt they deserved. They asked Rav Moshe if they could seek support from authorities outside of England to put pressure on the English authorities to do what they, the Jews, felt was right for their schools.

In response, Rav Moshe counseled against this strategy because he was afraid that it would arouse enmity (eivah) among the English authorities against the Jews. And he went on to write that Jew-hatred is high even among those nations who appear to treat Jews favorably. You think they love you? You think they respect you? Not at all. And, in support of this position, he cited the Rashi with which we began, הלכה היא בירעת עשו. He claims that just like halacha is immutable, unchanging, constant and permanent, so is Jew-hatred or anti-Semitism:

正如法律固定不变，恶对雅各的仇恨也是一样。

And so, I think that at the end of the day it’s a reality. I was born in America. I have benefitted enormously from America. I have incredible hakoras ha-tov for America. Rav Moshe famously called America “the medinah shel chessed.” But at the end of the day, there is something going on here that transcends my understanding and my comfort level. Of course, we need to be vigilant. We need to be proactive in our battle against anti-Semitism. We need to do whatever we can to defend ourselves. We dare not be complacent or passive. Of course. But it is a fact. There is no explanation or justification for it. There is no rationale. Azoy iz dos. It is what it is. It’s a given. It’s a metzi’us.

"These Times"

The reality of anti-Semitism has also found its way into halachic literature. The Gemara (Yevamos 47a) discusses the procedure for conversion. If a prospective ger comes to a beis din “these times (bi-zman ha-zeh)” and announces his or her desire to convert to Judaism, the first response is dissuasion:

מה ראית ספר הזנות כי אתה מ_require
olicitud כדי שהโรงพי ה averוס ממוש🦷 בצים.

What is wrong with you? Why in the world do you want to convert? Don’t you know that the Jewish people are now afflicted, oppressed, downtrodden and harassed? Why would you choose to be part of such a persecuted people?

And what is the reference to “these times (bi-zman ha-zeh)”? The times of Chazal? Yes, but not only then. This ruling, and the sentiment it expresses, applies to any time anyone learns this Gemara. It applies to all times, whenever a ger may come with the desire to convert. “These times” are these times. And indeed this ruling is cited in the Mishneh Torah of the Rambam (Hilchos Issurei Bi’ah, 14:1) virtually word for word. “These times” have now been extended some thousand years. And they extend until today.

Looking to the Future

Given this reality, how do we look to the future? Where can we find the strength and the fortitude to proceed, assured not only of survival but even of a glorious and meaningful future? The Rambam continues (14:4) that one tells a ger who persists in his or her quest, who, despite it all, still wants to join the Jewish people, that although we may be downtrodden, our existence is assured for all eternity: כל העמים כלין והן עומדין).

All the nations will be destroyed but
the Jewish people will remain. We have a havtachah, a divine promise, a divine reassurance that, despite all our challenges, we will exist forever. Even though things look difficult and, as a matter of fact are difficult, we are here now and will be here forever. We aren’t going anywhere. Hashem has whatever Hashem’s cheshbonos may be, but our current existence — and our ongoing future existence — is absolutely assured. We shouldn’t despair and think that our very existence as a nation is in jeopardy. Chas ve-shalom. We have a havtachah from the Ribono Shel Olam that we will persevere and exist for all time.

The Rambam makes this explicitly clear in his Iggeres Teman, written to the Jews in Yemen at the end of the twelfth century who were beset with terrible challenges and persecution; greater challenges, much greater challenges, than we face right now, in 2020, in America. The Rambam writes:

וכבר הבטיח לנו ה’ יתעלה על ידי נביאיו שאנו

Rambam writes:

right now, in 2020, in America. The much greater challenges, than we face and persecution; greater challenges, were beset with terrible challenges the end of the twelfth century who give chizuk clearly in his Iggeres Teman, the Rambam makes this explicitly will persevere and exist for all time from the Ribbono Shel Olam havtachah Chas ve-shalom.

And what sustained the Jews of Yemen in the twelfth century sustains us now, in the twenty-first century, the divine assurance that our existence is assured for all eternity.

It is true that this assurance is a national one, not an individual one. It is for the klal, not the yachid, for Klal Yisrael, not “Reb Yisrael.” Indeed, each one of us needs to do whatever we can to merit our own personal existence. We need to take responsibility for whatever we can do. But we also take comfort in the fact that we are part of a larger nation assured of eternal existence.

Our Miracle of Survival

This notion that, somehow, we Jews survive despite all the enormous challenges and difficulties we face, is recognized also by Gentiles. Let me give you one example. Nicholas Berdyaev was a very prominent Russian religious philosopher and dissident who died in exile, in Russia, in 1948. He understood how Jewish survival defied any rational explanation. In his The Meaning of History, he wrote:

I remember how the materialist interpretation of history, when I attempted in my youth to verify it by applying it to the destinies of peoples, broke down in the case of the Jews, where destiny seemed absolutely inexplicable from the materialistic standpoint. And, indeed, according to the materialistic and positivist criterion, this people ought long ago to have perished. Its survival is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon demonstrating that the life of this people is governed by a special predetermination, transcending the processes of adaptation expounded by the materialistic interpretation of history. The survival of the Jews, their resistance to destruction, their endurance under absolutely peculiar conditions, and the fateful role played by them in history; all these point to the particular and mysterious foundation of their destiny.

Throughout our long, complex history — from ancient through modern times — we have been forced to confront demographic dispersion, political disintegration, economic dislocation, social alienation, psychological oppression, subtle as well as crude discrimination and, worst of all, brute physical annihilation.9 And you know what? Nisim ve-nifla’os! Miracle of miracles! We are still here! This non-Jew understood that the existence of the Jew defied any of the rational categories with which he was familiar. He recognized it to be what he described as “a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon.” It is mysterious, it is inexplicable. Something unusual is going on here. But we know exactly what it is. It is the havtachah, the assurance, that the Ribono Shel Olam gave us. This is what keeps us going as a people and this is what also keeps us going as individuals.

Dry Bones

I want to now move to divrei chizuk and want to share with you a thought that I believe can help us confront the challenges that we currently face, and give us confidence that, im yirtzeh Hashem, with siyata d’Shmaya, we will be able to persevere.

We read in the haftarah on Shabbos Chol ha-Mo’ed Pesach how Yechezkel takes dry bones and then places sinews, flesh and skin upon them and they come alive (Yechezkel 37). He literally is mechayeh mesim.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 92b) picks
The key to our eternal existence are the **tefillin**, the **leichter**, the candlesticks, the **esrog** box that, somehow, my **zaydy** and **bubby** were able to hide and I found it and I'm holding it.

Yisrael and they built a state. One-quarter, 25 percent, of the roughly 600,000 Jews who were living in Israel in May of 1948 when the State of Israel was founded were Holocaust survivors. What an extraordinary achievement.

And then the third group. R. Yehudah ben Beseira gets up and says, “Yes, this is great. Thank God you were not among ‘the dead’. Thank God you are part of Jewish destiny. You went to Israel, you made sure to create families. You had faith that there would be a future. Great. But that is not enough. Nothing will last unless you are holding your zaydy’s tefillin, your bunny’s Shabbos candles, your parents’ Chanukah menorah.”

What is the key for nitzchiyus Yisrael? What did we do when we were faced with the Shoah, the most brutal example of anti-Semitism in Jewish history ever? It is a massive understatement to say that it was worse than it is now in the United States. Some of the survivors rejected Jewish identity. Some of them built a State of Israel. Great. But the key to our eternal existence, the sources of the **haftachah** that we have from the **Ribbono shel Olam**, are the **tefillin**, the **leichter**, the candlesticks, the **esrog** box that, somehow, my **zaydy** and **bubby** were able to hide and I found it and I’m holding it. At the end of the day, **this** is what keeps us. **This** is what sustains us when we’re faced with difficulty, with challenges.

Yes, we experienced Peter Stuyvesant and Ulysses S. Grant and Father Coughlin. We saw the Rashi, the **Yalkut Shimoni**, the Maharatz Chayis, the **Torah Temimah** and especially Rav Moshe underscoring the principle of “The dead that Yechezkel revived stood on their feet, sang praise and died...” It was a powerful interpretation of this Gemara from my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, z”l.

A number of years ago, I heard a powerful interpretation of this Gemara by Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series • Pesach 5780
because you have parents and bubbes and zaydys who are heirs to a great mesorah, many of whom know what it means to be moser nefesh for am Yisrael and Torah Yisrael.

You are blessed to live during this time. Yes, there are challenges, but, ultimately, the way to overcome them is to hold on to those tefillin, to take your Gemaras and hold them up high and dance with them. Be proud of your mesorah and devote yourselves to it fully, be-lev va-nefesh. Continue the talmud Torah, the yiras Shamayim, the mesorah of your bubbes and your zaydys and their bubbes and zaydys and so that, im yirtzeh Hashem, together we will put this parashah in our history behind us and we will be able to go with full joy and full-throated enthusiasm to the days of Eliyahu Hanavi, the harbinger of redemption, bimherah v’yamenu, amen.

**Endnotes**

6. I thank Rabbi Ezra Goldschmiedt for bringing to my attention a powerful passage from R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, *Sefer Teshuvot Ibra*, vol. 2 (New York, 1989), 233, that takes very strong exception to this fatalistic attitude. Rabbi Henkin goes so far as to claim that this approach is contra ha-melach ve-ha-makom.


9. See ibid.