

JULY 9, 2007

Parashat Matot-Ma'asei

Speaking Out

V'shamah ishah v'hecherish lah "If her husband heard and was silent" (Numbers 30:12)

In this part of our *parashah*, we learn the laws of oaths. According to the Torah, a husband and father have the right to override an oath made by a wife or a daughter but, if the vow is heard and no objection is raised, the oath stands. In his commentary on this *pasuk*, Sforno reminds us that we have a responsibility to speak out when we know something to be wrong. When a person has the ability to protest and remains silent, it is as though he has verbally consented.

When we remain silent in the face of wrongdoing, we passively participate in it or give it a *heksher*. Whether the evil is of a personal nature – such as *lashon hora* or financial impropriety – or of a global geopolitical nature, our people need to hear their rabbis loudly and clearly.

Perhaps the most important issue on which our communities need to hear rabbis' voices is the Iranian nuclear threat. In addition to the illicit nuclear program, Iran has long been the world's leading state-sponsor of terrorism, has used its terrorist ties to wage a proxy war against Israel from Lebanon and Gaza, and now, according to the U.S. military, is waging a terrorist war against American forces. The idea of this rogue regime armed with nuclear weapons – or, worse, distributing them to Hamas and Hizballah – is not just of geopolitical concern. It is a moral issue.

As the storm cloud of a nuclear Iran continues to gather over all of humanity, we feel more urgently the need for moral leadership on the issue. Our people need to hear from us about the immediacy of the threat. ■

Rust Removal

V'chol asher lo yavo ba'eish, ta'aviru vamayim "Everything that cannot withstand fire you will pass through water" (Numbers 31:23)

In this section about kashering vessels previously used for non-kosher foods, we read about the necessity to pass materials such as gold, copper, lead, iron, and tin through fire and water. This cleansing is more than symbolic – the idea is to burn off or loosen any rust or particle containing even a trace of what had been in the vessel. Once the vessel is clean, it can be used to store kosher foods and liquids.

The Chafetz Chayim comments on this section that the same rule applies to the purification of people. First, a person must remove their own "rust" by regretting their misdeeds, vowing not to repeat them, and properly repenting. Then, a person must replace their negative actions with equal amounts of and enthusiasm for good behaviors.

The focus of the cleaning process is on a person's actions. We all know that repentance, while certainly a praiseworthy step, amounts to mere words if the penitent's behavior remains unchanged. On the other hand, no one can be expected to reverse course overnight and we should always encourage steps in the right direction. In this respect, we should be pleased and cautiously optimistic about the recent actions of the Palestinian Authority.

The new Palestinian government under President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad has labeled the terrorist group Hamas "murderous" and banned its militias. The two leaders also have reiterated their recognition of the Jewish state and rejected the use of violence as a political tool. If followed with consistent action, these promising steps can serve as the foundation for negotiations with Israel. Arab states, for their part, must contribute to these efforts by isolating Hamas, condemning its tactics and promoting moderation.

While we can never know how honest the "rust" removal process is, we can judge the repentance of the Palestinian leadership by its recent actions – which have been positive. With proper support, we can hope to grow these first steps into a lasting peace. ■

Mercy by the Ton

Titnu lanus shamah harotzei'ach "You shall provide for a murderer to flee there" (Numbers 35:6)

The murderer referred to in this verse is neither guilty of premeditated murder nor of accidentally causing a death. One who negligently, albeit, unintentionally killed someone, is sent to a "refugee" city to live among other negligent killers.

The negligent killer has caused tremendous damage: loss of life, the suffering of loved ones and friends, and an end to unknowable potential of the deceased. Yet we recognize the lack of intent on the part of the negligent murderer and therefore show him mercy. The Torah tells us to imitate God, to "walk in His ways." Part of emulating God is acting in a merciful fashion. Our people are known as *rachmanim b'nei rachaminim*, a people with an ingrained culture of mercy.

This mercy has been shown to the world these past weeks as the Jewish state, despite the fact that Gaza is now ruled by Hamas, continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in Gaza in the form of food, electricity, fuel, and water. Israel has even allowed Fatah members to flee to the West Bank.

Last week, the Israel Defense Forces reported transferring to Gaza: 676 tons of sugar, 375 tons of animal feed, 191 tons of fruits, 159 tons of salt, 31,000 gallons of cooking oil, 19,000 gallons of milk, 36 tons of rice, 36 tons of tea, 33 tons of meat, 20 tons of coffee, 20 tons of cocoa, 14 tons of milk powder, 5 tons of medical equipment for babies, 10 tons of diapers and thousands of vaccines. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said that the Jewish state "will not be indifferent to the human suffering in Gaza."

Israel is right to not turn her back on the suffering people of Gaza. But the willful murderers of Hamas should realize that this mercy and refuge do not apply to them – only to the people they seek to rule over. ■