

AUGUST 6, 2007

Parashat R'ei

No Middle Way

R'ei, anochhi notein lifneichem hayom brachah v'klalah “*See, I place before you today blessing and curse.*”
(Deuteronomy 11:26)

The *sidra* opens with God telling B'nei Yisrael that they have a choice to make: abide by the commandments and receive blessing or disobey and be cursed. Sforno, in his commentary on the first three *p'sukim* of the *parashah*, says that this either/or choice indicates to us that there is no middle way. The Torah offers us a choice between blessing and curse. Those are the options depending on our behavior.

This system of rewards and punishments is familiar to us in modern, secular life. There are always consequences for our actions. Could any of us be consistently late for work and not expect repercussions? Would we allow our teenagers to disregard a curfew without punishment? There are times in life at which there is no middle way.

Time is running out to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. As members of the U.N. Security Council continue to discuss potential new sanctions on Iran, Tehran is close to overcoming key technological hurdles that will enable it to enrich uranium on the scale needed to produce fuel for nuclear weapons. The United States needs to exhaust every economic, diplomatic and political tool to persuade the Iranian government to end its nuclear program.

Last week, the U.S. House overwhelmingly passed H.R. 2347 – the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act – by a vote of 408-6. The bill authorizes state and local efforts to divest from companies invested in Iran's energy and natural gas sector. Combined with H.R. 1400 – the Iran Counter-Proliferation Act still pending in the House – this legislation provides new tools to press Iran to end its nuclear program and make a definitive statement that our country is doing everything possible through non-military means to prevent a nuclear Iran. Both bills (S. 1430 and S. 970 respectively) are still pending in the Senate.

Unfortunately, the mullahs who rule in Tehran have left the international community without a middle way. Iran will not unilaterally choose to give up its weapons program and it has demonstrated its contempt for its own obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. International pressure is the only way. ■

All Together Now

V'hayah ki y'vi'achah HaShem “*For it will be when HaShem brings you in*” (Deuteronomy 11:29)

At the very beginning of our *parashah*, in describing to us the ceremony to take place on and between Mount Ebal and Mount G'rizim, the Torah switches in and out of the second-person plural. For the first few *p'sukim*, the use of

“you” is as if talking to a large group of people. Then, in our *pasuk*, it suddenly switches to the singular – as if talking directly to one person. In the last verses of the chapter, it switches back. Why the seeming disagreement?

The Torah is teaching us that each of us, as Jews, has two aspects to our identity. We exist as individuals, but also as a part of the Jewish people. For example, the *Shmoneh Esrei*, the most important prayer we say, is expressed entirely in the plural. We do not say "cure me" or "bless me." We say "cure us" and "bless us." We are referred to in Torah as Yisrael – one man’s name. Ezekiel (34:31) refers to us all as “Adam.” When Israel encamped at the foot of Sinai, it did so “as one man with one heart” (Mechilta, Yitro 1).

The unity of our people at Sinai is desperately needed now. Israel faces a host of existential threats that require a deepening of support from the United States. As we know, the U.S.-Israel relationship is a two-way street – the U.S. benefits from Israeli technology, intelligence capabilities, economic strength, and political stability in an unstable region. We need to let our elected representatives know how important it is that the U.S. stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel now.

While we all exist as individuals, our *parashah* teaches us that we also exist as part of the Jewish people. This identity ties us to our brothers and sisters in Israel and compels us to act on their behalf. ■

Shelter from the Storm

Lo t’ameitz et l’yav’chah “Do not harden your heart” (Deuteronomy 15:7)

In commanding us to practice *sh’mittah*, Torah tells us that there are to be none among us who are in need. If there are such people among us, we are required not to ignore them, but to give generously to them. Sefer HaChinuch (478) teaches us that it is a violation of a commandment if we are able to help someone in need and fail to do so. Talmud (K’tubot 68a) says that, if a person closes his eyes to charity, it is as though he had committed idolatry!

Physical sustenance requires provision of basic needs: food, water, and shelter are the three most obvious. It is this need for shelter – and the fact that we are commanded to open our hearts and hands to help those in need – that should cause us to pay special attention to the plight of our brothers and sisters in the Israeli town of Sderot.

Since Israel’s pullout from Gaza in 2005, Sderot has been under a daily barrage of rockets fired indiscriminately in the direction of the town. More than 2,700 rockets, nearly three per day, have been fired at southern Israel in the past two years; many of them toward the closest large town to the border of northern Gaza, Sderot. The rockets are completely unguided and crudely made, but have hit homes, schools and synagogues, injured dozens and killed eight people. Perhaps even more cruelly, they have created a nearly unlivable situation for the people of Sderot who live with the constant fear of indiscriminate bombardment.

Two weeks ago, a rocket fired from Gaza directly hit the bedroom of eight-month-old Anastasia Pavlotzkin. Thankfully, Anastasia’s mother had responded to a warning siren and taken her from her crib minutes earlier.

It is our obligation to help the people of Sderot and southern Israel by doing everything we can to ensure that our government helps Israel combat the terrorist groups now operating with free rein in Gaza. The U.S. must work with the new Palestinian government of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayad to isolate and weaken Hamas. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.