

AUGUST 13, 2007

Parashat Shoftim

Obvious Action

Lo titah l'chah asheirah “You will not plant for yourself an asheirah” (Deuteronomy 16:21)

Talmud (Sanhedrin 7b) equates an *asheirah* – a tree that is worshipped as an idol – with an unqualified or unlearned judge. R. Chayim Soloveitchik explained that a regular idol is obvious to everyone, whereas a tree that has been worshipped looks like an ordinary tree. Whoever sees the regular idol will know to steer clear, but the tree's appearance is deceptive. So, too, an unqualified judge can appear knowledgeable and wise – but this appearance makes him dangerous because people will not know to treat his rulings with suspicion.

When we consider the words of Syrian President Bashar Assad, we must keep the *asheirah* in mind. Even as it calls for peace talks with Israel, Syria is threatening war against the Jewish state. These threats are amplified by Damascus' continuing military build-up, its actions in Lebanon, including rearming Hizballah, and its support of Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas, whose top leaders reside in Damascus.

Syria is increasing its military arms build-up and emulating Hizballah's tactics. Israeli officials indicate that in recent months the Syrians have built up substantial defenses in and around the Golan Heights and are stockpiling new arms. In May, then-Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh revealed that “Syria is now in the middle of an unprecedented process of a huge military buildup.”

Syria also continues its support for terrorism and its efforts to undermine Lebanon's government. Syria continues to host the offices of a dozen terrorist groups despite Assad's May 2003 promise to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell to close them. Assad refuses to recognize Lebanon's sovereignty and declines to demarcate Syria's border with Lebanon. The Syrian regime is also working to block efforts of the U.N. tribunal to try those suspected in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Israel is prepared to negotiate with a Syrian partner serious about abandoning its destructive policies and promoting regional peace. But “peace” is not just a word – it must accompany actions. Until Bashar Assad's actions match his words, he must be viewed as an *asheirah* – a danger hiding in plain sight. ■

Memorandum of Understanding

V'lalaechet bidrachav kol hayamim “And to walk in His ways every day” (Deuteronomy 19:9)

In telling B'nei Yisrael to establish the cities of refuge, the Torah stresses our obligation to walk in God's ways “every day.” The Chafetz Chayim, in his commentary on this verse, takes note of the phrase *kol hayamim* and takes it to mean that there is a constant requirement for us to act with *chesed*.

Chesed is not something we do periodically or when the mood suits us. We don't do *chesed* now and again – we do it every day.

Earlier this month, the Bush Administration announced its intention to implement a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Israel that will provide the Jewish State with \$30 billion in security aid over the next 10 years. The new MOU will be the culmination of many months of discussion between the U.S. and Israel necessitated by the drawing to a close of a 10-year plan of American assistance to Israel. The new aid to Israel will reflect a more than 20 percent increase in aid. This assistance will be a vital component in helping Israel meet its military modernization needs and counter existing and future threats in a dynamic and increasingly challenging regional environment.

Security assistance to Israel sends a signal to Israel's adversaries that the U.S. commitment to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge and deterrent capabilities is long-term and meaningful. U.S. support for our sister democracy Israel is not only in America's best strategic interests; it is an act of *chesed*.

Our community should prepare to work closely with Congress to safeguard Israel's qualitative military edge and help ensure support for the increase in American aid to Israel. ■

Giving and Taking

V'chi y'hiyeh ish sonei l'rei'eihu “But if there is a man who hates his fellow” (Deuteronomy 19:11)

As we read in the subsequent verse, the law being explained in this section is that one who deliberately kills may not seek shelter in the cities of refuge. Why, then, does the Torah include the seemingly unnecessary information about an *ish sonei l'rei'eihu*? Ultimately, whether he hates his victim or not, the law still applies to the murderer in question. Rashi, citing Sifrei, comments on this verse that Leviticus 19:17 commands us *lo tisnah et achichah bilvavechah*. If a person violates that relatively easy commandment, says Rashi, his end will be to violate a more severe commandment.

We all know the phrase “give him an inch and he'll take a yard.” People don't usually start out violating major rules or breaking the most important laws. They start out small – like the person who hates his fellow – and graduate to larger and larger violations. Perhaps Rashi's point is that we should stop giving inches.

For years, the Iranian regime has taken yard after yard from the international community in pursuit of an illegal nuclear weapons program. With Iran continuing to defy demands to suspend its nuclear activities, members of the House and Senate have introduced comprehensive legislation aimed at increasing economic and political pressure on Iran to persuade Tehran to end its nuclear program. The legislation closes loopholes in existing sanctions law, strengthens U.S. tools to cut off funds to Iran's nuclear program and prohibits U.S. nuclear cooperation with those aiding Iran's atomic efforts. We should urge members of the House and Senate to cosponsor the Iran Counter-Proliferation Act (H.R. 1400 in the House and S. 970 in the Senate).

Winston Churchill famously referred to those who try to placate aggressors by saying, “An appeaser is one who feeds the crocodile hoping it will eat him last.” Our message to Iran must be swift and unequivocal. And our representatives must act quickly to send it. ■