

DECEMBER 17, 2007

Parashat Va'y'chi

World Citizenship

Va'y'chi Ya'akov “And Ya'akov lived” (Genesis 47:28)

Rashi, along with several others, notes that Parashat Va'y'chi is a *parashah s'tumah* and attributes the “closure” of the portion to the *shibud Mitzrayim*. Once Ya'akov passed away, we learn, the eyes and hearts of Yisrael were closed because of the suffering of the *shibud*. In his commentary on the last verse of Parashat Vayigash, *vayeishev Yisrael b'erezt Mitzrayim b'erezt Goshen vaye'achazu vah*, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches us that the grip of Egypt took hold of Israel at this point and they took the first step to slavery. The S'fat Emet tells us that there are two kinds of slavery – physical and spiritual. When Israel's eyes no longer saw the depravity of the Egyptian lifestyle and Israel's heart no longer perceived Egyptian injustice, the S'fat Emet tells us this was the beginning of our *shibud ruchani*.

While we have often been forced to care first for our own brothers and sisters, turning a blind eye to the rest of humanity runs counter to Jewish values. This is one reason that American Jews have always been so proud of Israel. Whether helping to battle wildfires in Greece this past summer or aiding victims of the 2004 tsunami, Israel has truly been an *or lagoyim*.

For example, an Israeli medical delegation is currently in Swaziland to teach local African surgeons to perform circumcisions on men to reduce their risk of contracting AIDS, the first of three planned missions to Africa. Last March, based on “compelling evidence,” the World Health Organization and UNAIDS accepted expert opinions that adult male circumcision be recognized as an “additional important intervention” to reduce the risk of HIV infection. A few months prior to this decision, a UNAIDS delegation came to the Jewish State to learn how best to perform adult male circumcision, given Israel's experience in performing *brit milah* for voluntary conversion of new immigrants. Studies suggest that male circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa could prevent 5.7 million new cases of HIV infection and three million deaths over 20 years, or up to 60% of infected males.

Israel's international humanitarianism is an example to all nations of how to avoid the *shibud ruchani* of selfishness and greed. ■

My Word

Hishavah li “Promise me” (Genesis 47:31)

In one of his last utterances on earth, Ya'akov asks Yosef to promise that he will not bury his father in Egypt. Does Ya'akov not trust Yosef? Ya'akov might have reason not to trust his other sons, but Yosef, his favorite son? Ramban teaches us that Ya'akov believed Yosef was trustworthy, but wanted “to strengthen the issue in the eyes of Par'oh lest he would not give Yosef permission to leave...or that he might desire to bury the prophet in his land as a respect to

Egypt.” Sforno adds that Ya’akov was concerned that the Egyptian regime would renege on its promise to allow Ya’akov to be buried outside of Egypt.

While the recently published National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) reports that Iran discontinued its nuclear weapons program in 2003, we should remember three key points: Iran spent twenty years lying about having a nuclear program in the first place, Iran is still pursuing all of the technological pieces that would easily fit together to form a weapons program, and Iran is still the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism.

Under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran must submit all nuclear activity to international inspection. For years, Iran lied to the world about having a nuclear program. Since being caught, Iran has impeded the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which, in its latest report, said Iran is not providing adequate cooperation or transparency in the inspection process.

Iran is still enriching uranium and developing missile and warhead technologies. These are, obviously, the key ingredients in the development and delivery of a nuclear weapon. Whether or not it has a “nuclear weapons program,” mastering these components would allow it to weaponize its nuclear program at any time. Iran also continues to fund terrorist groups like Hamas and Hizballah as well as providing arms, explosives, and support to terrorists killing American soldiers in Iraq. The U.S. State Department has long listed Iran among the world’s leading state-sponsors of terrorism.

Unlike when Yosef makes a promise, Iran’s history forces us to remain vigilant. Pushing for further, harsher sanctions – which the NIE acknowledges have been successful – may be the only to stop Iran from going nuclear. ■

Leading to Action

Sikeil et yadav “Crossing his hands” (Genesis 48:14)

In a pivotal moment in our *parashah*, Ya’akov blesses his grandchildren by deliberately switching his hands to bless Ephraim with his right hand. The word *sikeil* is seldom-used and our commentators examine it closely. The root *sin-chaf-lamed* means “knowledge” or “intellect.” By using this word, we know that this action was intentional. A few *p’sukim* later, Ya’akov even assures Yosef that this action was pre-planned and knowledge-based. Ibn Ezra teaches us that “it is as if his hands had the intellect to act according to what he wanted to do.”

For most of us, actions are a result of a deliberate thought process – but all of our thinking and planning usually leads to some sort of action. In Jewish Law, almost every *mitzvah* requires an action. It is not enough to believe in a doctrine or hope for a good outcome – one has to act!

As Israel has, in the past few months, demonstrated its serious commitment to peace by “forging a historic path” that will result in “two states for two peoples,” it is now time for the Palestinian Authority and the Arab States to take action. The PA has a great opportunity to match Israel’s commitment to make peace by ending rampant incitement against Israel, recognizing Israel as a Jewish State, and building the institutions and civic infrastructure that will allow for a democratic future for the Palestinian people. The PA must also continue to resist calls for a rapprochement with Hamas until it recognizes Israel’s right to exist, renounces terrorism, and promises to abide by past agreements. Meanwhile, the Arab States must make it OK for the Palestinians to pursue historic compromise with Israel, by providing political and financial support to Abbas in his struggle with the radical Hamas, and by leading the way in normalizing relations with the Jewish State.

It is not enough for PA President Mahmoud Abbas to exchange pleasantries with Israeli leaders. He must match his actions to his rhetoric, and the Arab States must as well. ■