

JANUARY 14, 2008

Parashat B'shalach

A Friend in Deeds

Derech erez P'lishtim *“By way of the land of the Philistines”* (Exodus 13:17)

In order to avoid war with the Philistines, Hashem takes B'nei Yisrael the long way out of Egypt. Despite a wish to avoid conflict, and their effort to do so, our ancestors were still chased by the Egyptians and attacked by Amalek. How can it be that a people who have been enslaved for over 200 years – stuck in one country where they were a threat to no one – had three nations interested in attacking them? The answer is simple: fear. The Egyptians, Amalek, and the Philistines were all afraid of the Israelites. In fact, Midrash (Sh'mot Rabbah 20:16) tells us in the name of R. Yochanan that the Canaanite peoples cut down and destroyed their own crops in order to make their land less appealing to the invading Israelites. Isn't it strange that a nation of slaves should strike fear in the hearts of three established countries?

The Jewish people have, in the past, been forced to walk through a friendless world. Before the *galut*, our ancestors were constantly under attack from larger, stronger empires. During our exile, we were forced to live at the mercy of those who barely tolerated (and, sometimes, did not tolerate) our presence.

As Americans, we know that the United States' special relationship with Israel serves America's national security and economic interests. We also know that Israel and the U.S. share common values and a common view of the world. But, as Jews, our history forces us to be additionally thankful that our brothers and sisters in Israel have earned our country's powerful friendship.

President Bush's trip to Israel last week served as a reaffirmation of the historic strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship. Now, as we enter into an election year, we must work to make sure that our elected leaders understand this special relationship and are committed to strengthening and deepening it in ways that will benefit both nations. ■

Blinded Judgment

N'vuchim hem ba'aretz *“They are astray in the land”* (Exodus 14:3)

HaShem tells Moshe that, now that the Israelites are free in the wilderness, Paroh will think that they are essentially lost and wandering aimlessly. After all that God had done for B'nei Yisrael, how could Paroh make such a terrible miscalculation as to think God would abandon the people? In his work, Chochmah U'mussar (1:316), R. Aharon Hemedi cites R. Simcha Zissel of Kelm as teaching us that a person's will and desire can blind his or her intellect. In the case of Paroh, his desire to bring back his “workforce” caused him to make a fatal error.

This is an easy mistake to understand. We have all said to ourselves, “how could I have been so stupid?” At one point or another, we all let our desire get in the way of our judgment.

As Iran continues its headlong push for the technology necessary to build nuclear weapons, we see a similarly troubling lack of judgment. There is no question that Iran continues to enrich uranium in violation of two U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding they stop and that such enrichment is the key step to building nuclear weapons. Although the recently released National Intelligence Estimate assesses (with only “moderate confidence”) that Iran has not restarted its weapons program, it could choose to do so at any time, and its current illegal enrichment program would mean that it would not have lost a step in developing nuclear weapons.

This behavior on the part of Iran’s leaders is hurting the people of Iran. Economic sanctions and political isolation have taken a toll on the country – yet Iran’s leaders continue to spout dangerous rhetoric and defy the will of the United Nations.

Paroh forced his people to suffer for letting his desire blind his judgment. We can only hope that Iran’s leaders will turn from their dangerous course before the damage to their country gets worse. In the meantime, just as Paroh got no reprieve, Iran needs to know that only compliance will end its economic and political isolation. ■

Can We Get An Amen?

Va’y’hi yadav emunah “His hands remained steady” (Exodus 17:12)

At the end of our *parashah*, we encounter a dramatic description of Israel’s battle with Amalek. Moshe stands upon a hill and raises his hands with the help of Aharon and Hur to encourage the troops. *Emunah*, a rather unusual word, is used to describe Moshe’s hands. *Emunah* can mean faith, belief, stability, established and steady. It can also mean ‘truth based on firm belief.’ As we know, the word *amen* is derived from the same *shoresh*. Rashi teaches us that Moshe’s arms were “outstretched to the heavens in faithful and proper prayer.”

It is interesting to note that Ramban interprets this word as having to do with an agreement or a treaty (from the word *amanah*). Agreements and treaties are very much in the news nowadays, and we should derive a lesson from the fact that the Hebrew word for “treaty” and the words for “truth” and “faith” come from the same root.

Just as Moshe stretched out his arms and held them there for a very long time, Israel has repeatedly expressed her willingness to make difficult decisions based on truth, belief and stability. But such sacrifices can only result in peace if both sides are willing to act. The Palestinian Authority (PA) must stop the rampant incitement against Israel in Palestinian media and textbooks. The PA must dismantle the terror infrastructure and recognize Israel as the Jewish State. The Arab States must also be involved in providing economic support to the Palestinians and prepare their own people for recognition and normalization with the Jewish State and its citizens.

President Bush has expressed his desire for Israel and the Palestinians to reach an agreement before he leaves office. He has *emunah* that this can be achieved. President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert also have faith that peace can be achieved, but not without painful concessions. Olmert, in his speech last week welcoming President Bush, he said that “the Israeli team is absolutely committed to carry on these negotiations in a very serious manner, to deal with all the core issues that we need to deal with...” Additionally, “there can be no peace unless terror is stopped and terror will have to be stopped everywhere.” Israel believes strongly that peace can be achieved if the other side is equally committed to peace. For true *emunah*, it cannot be one sided.

Let us hope that, like Moshe, both Israel and the Palestinians have the ability to stay focused and resolved. Let them negotiate *be’emet ve’emunah* so that there might be an *amanah*. Amen. ■