



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 18, 2008

Parashat Ki Tissa

Rep. Tom Lantos, z"l

Re'ei karati v'shem "*See I have called by name*" (Exodus 31:2)

After going through the litany of ritual items in the *Mishkan* over the past two *parashayot*, we learn more about the architect and chief artisan of the Tabernacle. We are told that Betzalel was specifically named by God and imbued with *ru'ach elokim* as well as wisdom, understanding and cognizance. He was also experienced in working with various materials. Talmud (BT Berachot 25a) teaches us that "Rav Yochanan said: a good *parnas* is publicized personally by God." Rashi further instructs us that a true leader is able to synthesize what he hears from others and what he understands in his heart.

Throughout history, there have been people singled out by God but who do not want to single themselves out. These people work tirelessly for causes but do not seek the limelight.

Last week our country lost one of the true giants of our time. Congressman Tom Lantos never sought great notoriety. Indeed, many Americans have probably never heard his name. But every American benefited from his erudite and thoughtful leadership. Tom Lantos was the only Holocaust survivor to ever serve in Congress. Having been witness to one of the darkest moments in history, he dedicated his life and career to ensuring that American leadership illuminated the dark places of the world.

Tom Lantos knew firsthand the importance of the Jewish State and was a steadfast proponent of a strong American-Israel relationship. He knew and understood that if there had been an Israel in the 1930s and 1940s, six million Jewish souls could have been spared. His transformation from a child in Nazi Europe to a Congressman in California is the embodiment of America's greatness and the miracle of our democracy. There is no issue that affects the American-Israel relationship that does not bear the imprimatur of his leadership. As a memory and a tribute to Congressman Lantos, it is crucial to keep his issues on the front burner. Iran continues to enrich uranium and pose a threat to Israel and the United States. Hamas continues to shoot rockets towards Sderot and other Southern Israeli towns. Hizballah is rearming on the Lebanon border.

Just like the *Mishkan* and its ritual objects outlived Betzalel, so will the lasting legacy of Tom Lantos – America's strong commitment human rights and the U.S.-Israel relationship. *Zichrono l'vrachah* and may his family and loved ones be comforted among the mourners of our people. ■

If He Can Do It...

Vayinachem HaShem "*HaShem repented*" (Exodus 32:14)

After the sin of the *egel*, God's anger at the "stiff-necked people" nearly boils over. Moshe convinces HaShem not to destroy B'nei Yisrael. In backing away from the brink, Torah uses the word *nacham* – a word most frequently used to convey the sense of regret, comfort and repentance. The Ibn Ezra teaches us that "the Torah speaks in the words of human beings." Human characteristics are ascribed to God because they are all our human abilities allow us to understand.

Even though God does not "repent" the way humans do, if the word can be used in connection to God, how much the moreso should it be said of human beings? We are, all of us, beings in need of humility and repentance.

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that came out in December bolstered the case for the threat posed by Iran. Unfortunately, because of the way the document was portrayed in the media, aspects of the NIE that seem to cast doubt on Iran's intentions were overemphasized. Last week, Adm. Mike McConnell, U.S. Director of National Intelligence, addressed a major shortcoming in the NIE. His statement could easily be read as a form of *nechamah*. Adm. McConnell said, "I think I would change the way that we described the nuclear program. I may have put it up front...so that the reader could quickly grasp that a portion of it was halted and there are other parts that continue."

Iran continues to pose a threat to Israel and America. Uranium enrichment, the most complicated part of making nuclear weapons, continues at a feverish pace. Last week, Iran launched a rocket to test its capability for reaching space. Experts have indicated that such a rocket could be used to hit Israel as well as countries as far away as Russia and parts of Europe.

Adm. McConnell has recast the format and structure of the NIE and has reasserted that Iran is and remains a threat. Further sanctions should be enacted to ensure that Iran will cease to be a threat in the future. ■

No Joy

Vayichar af Moshe "Moshe became enraged" (Exodus 32:19)

As Moshe comes back down from Sinai – with the tablets of the law in his hands – he finds the people committing *chet ha'egel*. A sin that still today leaves us incredulous, we can only imagine Moshe's anger at the evil and fickleness of the people. But it was not simply that they had created an idol that so angered Moshe. Sforno comments that Moshe was angry because he saw that the people had joy from the wrong that they were doing. Had they been ashamed or felt badly, their error would have been correctable. Instead, there was singing and dancing.

Last week, a suicide bomber killed 73-year-old Lyubov Razdolskaya and wounded 38 others at a shopping center in the Negev town of Dimona. A police officer shot and killed a second terrorist before he detonated his explosive belt. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack and praised it as a "heroic act". Worse, terrorists in Gaza and the West Bank openly celebrated the act by handing out candies and shooting off fireworks.

We know that Palestinian and Arab media indoctrinate the public with the most vile anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism, so such hatred and worship of death should not surprise us. But it should sadden us. And it should serve to recommit us to the task at hand. Arab leaders must prepare the region for peace by ending incitement against Israel and teaching their people to accept the Jewish state.

Singing and dancing was no way to react to the *egel hazahav* and it is no way to react to the news of a suicide bombing. Moshe's anger resulted in him smashing the tablets of the Commandments. Our anger should be channeled into making a positive difference. ■