

MARCH 24, 2008

Parashat Sh'mini

Zichronam L'vrachah

Vayidom Aharon “*And Aharon was silent*” (Leviticus 10:3)

After experiencing the personal tragedy of the loss of two sons, Aharon is instructed not to mourn. Instead of consoling his brother, Moshe explains to Aharon that this is what HaShem meant by “through those near to Me, I show Myself holy.” Rashbam teaches us that Moshe instructs his brother, “do not mourn, do not cry and do not cease your sacred work.” Courageously, Aharon remains silent, puts his own personal grief aside and continues on doing the sacred work of the *mishkan*.

The recent murders of eight students at the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva are shocking, heartbreaking, and infuriating. The terrorist assault was not just against civilian victims, not just against religious victims, but against the very heart of the Jewish people – a group of teenagers studying Torah. Because the attack was aimed squarely at the Jewish heart, it is vitally important to show the world that that heart still beats. Even in our mourning, we should act like Aharon and continue our sacred work.

We must communicate with our leaders in Washington that such attacks are the responsibility of Palestinian leadership that has still not embraced peace and rejected violence. The PA still prints vile incitement against Israelis and Jews in its official publications. President Abbas, though he backed away from the comments because of U.S. pressure, recently told a Jordanian newspaper that the only reason not to engage in “resistance” (the euphemism for terrorism) was that it wasn’t working right now, but that it might be an option in the future. While Abbas has taken some positive steps, the attack on Mercaz Harav shows how very much is still to be done.

We should mourn for these murdered boys and young men. But like Aharon, we must carry on with the sacred work of making sure that our leaders in Washington understand the attack for what it was – an assault not just on the Jewish heart, but on the peace process. We must demonstrate that, from our side, the attack has failed. And President Abbas, from his end, needs to do the same. ■

Playing Dress-Up

Vayisa’um b’chutanotam el michutz lamachaneh “*And they carried them in their coats outside of camp*” (Leviticus 10:5)

Nadav and Avihu were both appointed *kohanim* with full rights and privileges to serve as representatives of the Jewish people to perform the service in the Tabernacle. Unfortunately, they veered from their task and as “rogue *kohanim*” performed a service neither obligated nor allowed. Ramban points out that the brothers started off wearing the special attire reserved for the *kohanim*, but after their deaths, the unique clothing is removed from their bodies. Not only are their clothes removed from their bodies, but they are removed from the camp.

Last week, we celebrated Purim and many of our children probably dressed up as Mordechai or Esther. On Purim, playing dress-up is not only acceptable – it’s fun. But other times – as in the case of Nadav and Avihu – it can be destructive. And it’s not just an issue of dressing up in clothing. Anything we do to hide our activities can be looked at as “dressing up;” hiding who we really are.

Playing dress-up as a democracy has been a favorite pastime of Iran’s for decades. The Islamic Republic has regular elections and a 290-member parliament chosen by the people. Unfortunately, only candidates approved by Iran’s Expediency Council of Muslim clerics are permitted to run for office. While the Council, in theory, rules out candidates based on commitment to Islam and to the Revolution, the reality is that the clerics use the ability to ban candidates as an insurance policy to keep power. In elections held two weeks ago, the Council disqualified 2,400 potential candidates, most of them reformists. Little more than 100 seats were contested by candidates affiliated with any of the reformist parties (with all the best-known reformists banned) virtually assuring a hard-line majority in the new parliament. That’s not democracy. It’s theocratic dictatorship dressed up as democracy.

As our *parashah* suggests, the only thing to do is to strip away the “dress up” and banish it from the camp. The U.S. Senate is currently considering legislation, the Iran Counter-Proliferation Act (S. 970), that would, among other provisions designed to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons, increase funding for the Iranian pro-democracy movement. We can help stop Iran’s game of “dress-up.” ■

Cleaning Up

Bein ha’tamei u’vein ha’tahor “Between the unclean and the clean” (Leviticus 11:47)

Our *parashah* contains the foundational concepts and laws of the system of *kashrut*. We are provided with lists of animals, fish, fowl, and even insects that are permitted and prohibited. The words that Torah uses to indicate whether or not we may eat a particular animal are *tamei* and *tahor*. *Tamei* comes from the Hebrew *atum*, meaning “impermeable” or “sealed off.” From this, the Ramchal, in his work *Derech HaShem*, writes that God created the universe to consist of things that could be penetrated by the Divine light and things that could not – the latter, therefore, existing in a state of spiritual darkness. Though both *tamei* and *tahor* are necessary parts of the created universe, we deepen our spiritual lives when we choose the *tahor* – that which can let in God’s light.

Our lives are full of things that seem like major sacrifices but, in reality, open doors for us or enrich our days. Exercise may be taxing, but the reward in our health is worth the effort. Children are a major expense and, let’s face it, sometimes a headache – but there is no greater joy than parenthood.

Taking action on behalf of the U.S.-Israel relationship may seem like a sacrifice of time and energy, but it also a great joy for those who engage in it - primarily because of its importance, but also because the effectiveness of the pro-Israel community makes it such a worthwhile endeavor. Working with our leaders to ensure \$30 billion in U.S. military aid to Israel over the next ten years is difficult, joyous work. Meeting with a member of Congress at his or her office – during AIPAC’s annual Policy Conference or at another time – is an empowering activity.

Pirkei Avot teaches us that *hayom katzar v’ham’lachah m’rubah...v’ha’sachar harbeh*. Though it may mean a little more work for us, let us choose the *tahor* act of working to strengthen the relationship between the United States and Israel. ■