

APRIL 14, 2008

Parashat Acharei Mot

Be Aware

V'nasa hasa'ir alav et kol avonotam “*And the goat shall bear all their sins*” (Leviticus 16:22)

We're all familiar with the “scapegoat,” someone who bears the sins of others - or is, at least, blamed for them. Our *parashah* introduces the original scapegoat, used as a sacrifice during the Yom Kippur service in the Temple. The Kohen Gadol would confess the sins of the Jewish people on the head of the goat and then send the goat *l'azazel*, “to the cliff,” to fall to its death, representing the removal of sin from the Jewish people. How do we help ourselves by blaming a goat for our problems? In his commentary on this *pasuk*, the Kli Yakar explains that we should reread the word *avonotam* (“their sins”) as *avonot tam* – “the sins of the pure one,” referring to Ya'akov and his children. Because of the purity of the Children of Ya'akov, in order for us to sin we must have allowed outside forces to infiltrate us and defile us. So, we symbolically cast those sins away on the goat to return to our intended state.

It is interesting to note that the Kli Yakar does not give us a pass for our behavior – “we have allowed ourselves.” We are not passive observers of our own behavior – we are expected to be masters of it.

Contrast the notion of self-awareness and responsibility evident in the Kli Yakar's commentary with the language that Hamas teaches its children and citizens. A recent article (April 1, 2008) in the New York Times highlights the level of hateful rhetoric aimed both at Israel and the Jewish people from the clerics, Imams and even state-run media within Gaza. “Since Hamas took over Gaza last June, routing Fatah, Hamas sermons and media reports preaching violence and hatred have become more pervasive, extreme and sophisticated, on the model of Hezbollah and its television station Al Manar, in Lebanon.” Hamas television shows routinely teach children to hate Jews, Israelis, and Americans. Recently, on the same show that once featured a Mickey Mouse look-alike that taught children martyrdom and jihad, the newest character stabbed a puppet of President Bush to death after declaring that he was not pure enough to re-enter the White House as it had been converted into a mosque. To Hamas, everyone is responsible for Palestinian suffering...except the Palestinian leadership.

While we must be committed to peace, peace will only come when the scapegoat of both Jew and Arab is not the other side, but the negative within ourselves. ■

Being Different

U'v'chukoteihem lo teileichu “*And you shall not follow their laws*” (Leviticus 18:3)

After enumerating the various restrictions and injunctions pertaining to eating blood, our *parashah* implores us not to follow the ways of the nations that surrounded ancient Israel. Specifically, we are warned against emulating the actions and practices of those who live in Egypt and in Canaan. Rashi teaches us that “the place where Israel resided

was the most corrupted (*m'kulka*) of all.” That is not to say that the Israelites were corrupted. However, they had to be careful not to become like their neighbors.

We often hear of children protesting – and we may have said to our parents – “but so-and-so is doing it.” Regardless of what those around us are doing, we cannot become *m'kulka* just because everyone else is.

While Palestinian terrorists in Gaza continue to pound southern Israeli towns and cities with indiscriminate rocket and mortar fire targeting innocent civilians, Israel continues to respond with restraint and precision. Israel has demonstrated extreme restraint in the face of years of escalating rocket attacks and other violence against its civilians. Since Israel withdrew from Gaza in the summer of 2005, Hamas and other Iranian- and Syrian-backed terrorists have fired nearly 6,000 rockets and mortars into Israel. With the introduction of the longer-range Grad Katyusha rocket, the city of Ashkelon and its population of 125,000 Israelis has now come into range. Rather than responding in-kind to the attacks, e.g. by indiscriminately firing into Palestinian population centers, Israel has carried out only limited actions aimed at striking directly at the terrorists. Israel also continues to provide and allow delivery of humanitarian aid. Both Congress and the administration have supported Israel’s right to defend itself amid the increased violence. In an overwhelming vote of 404 to 1, Congress passed a resolution backing Israel’s defensive actions, while Secretary of State Rice has said that “no Israeli government can tolerate that...Israel will exercise its right to defense.”

Israel has refused to be dragged into the mud with the terrorists who control Gaza – to become, in a sense, *m'kulka*. Still, Israel will not be forced to put up with unceasing rocket fire against civilians with no end in site. Israel, like any sovereign nation, has a right to defend herself. We should be prepared to help Israel make that case to our neighbors and our leaders. ■

Peace and Protection

Vachai bahem “And live by them” (Leviticus 18:5)

A thorough look at Jewish history will find that we have been at war for most of our existence. From Abraham being thrown into the furnace of Nimrod, until recent rocket attacks from Gaza, we’ve been fighting throughout. With only a cursory glance, one might draw the conclusion that we are a war mongering people. This week’s *sidra* tells us otherwise. The verse tells us we are to live by the laws of the Torah. Talmud (Yoma 85b) interprets this to mean that we should live by the laws of the Torah and not die by them. Life takes precedence over just about every command. This verse commands us to chase life, and put all our efforts to ensure life’s continuance. War, fighting and battle contradict this message – especially when we consider that we are also commanded *bakeish shalom v’rodfeihu* (Psalms 34:15).

Why is it, then, that the Torah is so full of fighting? Why is recent Jewish history so full of violence – both against us and in our own defense? Part of chasing life includes ensuring that ours lasts. Allow ourselves to be attacked without taking measures of protection amounts to a violation of the principal taught in our *sidra*.

In dealing with threats from Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran, Israel has sought to balance these principles – to pursue peace, while protecting and defending lives both Israeli and Arab. Palestinian terrorists have fired more than 1,000 rockets and mortars into Israel in 2008, but Israel’s response has been to target terrorists. Hizballah continues to rearm while Israel relies on U.N. troops to do their jobs. Iran ramps up its bellicose rhetoric and its uranium enrichment while Israel calls for tough economic and political sanctions.

■ We yearn for the days of peace and security, yet know that as long as the attacks continue, Israel must defend herself.