

MAY 12, 2008

Parashat Behar

Israel's Right to Exist

Ki tavo'u el ha'aretz asher ani noten l'chem – “When you come into the land which I give you” (Leviticus 25:2)

In our *parashah*, in the context of *Shemittah* and *Yovel* - the commandments to leave the fields of the Land of Israel uncultivated during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, the Torah consistently refers to the Land of Israel as the inheritance of the Jewish people. In fact, we observe these commandments in order to impress upon ourselves the need to recognize this great gift to the Jewish people. Commenting on the *mitzvah* to leave the land untouched the Midrash Agadah tells us that the reason for this commandment is that God, “desired His people Israel, and gave them, ‘a pleasant land, the goodliest heritage of the nations!’ (Jeremiah 3:19) Said God: Plant for six [years] and leave fallow for the seventh, so that you will know that I gave you the land as a gift.”

It was only sixty years ago that the Land of Israel was once again given to the Jewish people and that the modern State of Israel came into existence. Yet, it is this very notion that Hamas refuses to acknowledge and prompts it to continue to attack Israeli civilians whenever possible.

Putting the lie to claims that Hamas is prepared to accept Israel's right to "live as a neighbor next door in peace," the Associated Press reported that Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal has stressed that his group would never recognize the Jewish state. "We agree to a [Palestinian Arab] state on pre-67 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital with genuine sovereignty without settlements but without recognizing Israel," Mashaal said. State Department spokesman Tom Casey said it is clear that "there is certainly no change in Hamas' position." In fact, Mashaal said the deal was only a temporary "tactic" in its long-term war against the Jewish state, and warned of more violence if Israel rejected his truce offer.

Despite Israel's desire to live in peace, side-by-side with a Palestinian neighbor, and despite its ongoing efforts to meet its road map obligations, we must continue to realize that this dream will not become reality until Hamas recognizes Israel, renounces violence and agrees to adhere to all previous agreements. After all these years Israel's right to exist should no longer be a question. ■

The Sounds of Sirens

Veha'avarta shofar Teruah – “Then you shall make proclamation with the blast of the horn” (Leviticus 25:9)

Throughout our long history, the Jewish people have sounded horns for many different reasons and on a variety of occasions. In our *parashah* we find the sounding of the *shofar* at the beginning of the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year on *Yom Kippur* day. What is the nature of these *shofar* blasts? What do these sounds signal to us?

Rabbi Baruch Epstein in *Torah Temimah* (in footnote 54 of Exodus chapter 13) interprets the sounding of the *shofar* during the *Yovel* by looking at the unusual language found in our *parashah*. Instead of telling us to “blow” the *shofar*

(*utekatem*) the Torah uses the term *veha'avarta* (to pass or distribute). He interprets the word based on the same term found in Exodus 36:6, where we read regarding the conclusion of the collection for the construction of the *mishkan*, *vaya'aviru kol bamachaneh* (and they caused it to be proclaimed throughout the camp). Thus, the *shofar* of the *Yovel* serves as an announcement and a call to attention. This *shofar* blast joyously heralds the arrival of the *Yovel* year and the freedom and renewal that it brings.

Contrast the sounds of the *shofar* on the *Yovel* with the sounds of the sirens in Israel today. The people of Sderot and the western Negev hear the sirens on a daily basis leaving them only fifteen seconds to find safety and shelter. This year alone, from January to March, rockets and mortars have struck southern Israeli communities at a rate of more than 60 per week and the tragic consequences of these attacks have resulted in nearly 200 Israeli casualties, including children. Terrorists are now firing longer-range Iranian and Syrian-supplied Katyusha rockets, threatening hundreds of thousands of Israelis and critical national infrastructure. At the same time Hamas is stage-managing a "crisis" in Gaza as Israel seeks to provide the Palestinians with basic humanitarian needs. More information on Hamas' build up of arms and attempts to generate a humanitarian crisis can be found [here](#).

With Hamas continuing to fire longer range rockets at Israel the next sounds of sirens heard "throughout the Land" will not be joyous proclamation of peace and prosperity, but rather the dire warnings of Israel's citizenry to quickly find shelter. ■

Helping the Oppressed - A Jewish and Israeli Trait

V'chi yamoch achicha u'mata yado imcha v'hechezakta bo – "And if your brother becomes impoverished and his means fail with you; then you shall uphold him" (Leviticus 25:35)

The Talmud (Yevamot 79a) teaches us that one of the three principal character traits of the Jewish people is that they are a nation that engages in acts of kindness. We find this truism particularly enmeshed in Parashat Behar.

In our *parashah* we are taught to uphold the well-being of a person who falls upon hard times. Commenting on the requirement to lend money to the poor without interest, the Torah tells us *ve'hechezakta bo* – "you shall uphold him." Why does the Torah describe loans to the poor as "upholding" and not as "helping" or "assisting"? Rashi (on verse 35) explains that instead of allowing the poor to fall and assisting in their recovery, we must give them the support that they need to stay on their feet. Rashi explains that, "This may be compared to a burden on a donkey: when it's still on the donkey, one person can grab the burden and steady the load. But when the donkey falls to the ground, five people will not suffice to pick it up."

We saw the State of Israel put this attribute of kindness into practice. In the devastating wake of Cyclone Nargis that recently ravished Myanmar, Israel joined the list of countries offering aid to the more than one million people left destitute and homeless. In response to this horrific natural disaster the Israeli Foreign Ministry is sending \$100,000 in initial emergency food and medical supplies. Going even further, Israel's volunteer umbrella organization, IsraAID, has put together an expert team of doctors, nurses and water specialists to provide immediate relief, treat the sick and asses which sources of water are safest for consumption. While the Israeli aid to Myanmar is extraordinary it is certainly not unique. In a wide variety of humanitarian crises around the round, ranging from Hurricane Katrina in the United States to the massive earthquake in Iran in 2004, Israel has consistently been among the first to offer humanitarian assistance (even to hostile regimes) demonstrating this spirit of kindness, charity and respect for human life.

As Eran Weintraub, General Manager of the Israeli non-profit group Latet, said, "Even though the poverty here is great and the distress is great, the fact that on the eve of the State of Israel's 60th Independence Day of all times us Israelis have the power to offer help fills me with a sense of pride." Helping the less fortunate is something we can all be proud of. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.