

MAY 5, 2008

Parashat Emor

Taking Nothing for Granted

Kol ha'ezrach b'Yisrael yishvu b'sukkot "Every citizen in Israel shall dwell in booths" (Leviticus 23:42)

In many different ways, the Torah communicates the importance of appreciating God's blessings both in personal and communal life. Many commandments communicate the message of God's divine blessings, reminding us to always be appreciative of what He gives us, so that we continue to merit that providential goodwill.

The mitzvah, which appears in our *parashah*, to dwell in the *sukkah* during the Festival of Tabernacles, is a good example of this type of commandment. Commenting on the requirement to sit, eat and live in temporary booths for seven days, the Torah explains that we must sit in the *sukkah*, "that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (23:43) However, why does God want us to commemorate that tenuous time in the desert?

Rashbam (on verse 43) explains this verse by quoting another section from later in the Torah. In Deuteronomy 8:7-17 Moshe warns the people not to fall into the trap of receiving tremendous blessings in the Land of Israel and mistakenly assume that, "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:17) According to Rashbam, we leave all the comforts of our houses to remind us that the Jews had no homes or inheritance when they wandered in the desert.

Today, we face the possibility of making this same mistake with regard to Israel's security. Every year Congress must authorize the foreign aid budget which provides, among other things, for support to Israel. Through the hard work of AIPAC and friends of Israel throughout the United States, the President's 2009 budget request includes a 25% increase in U.S. assistance to Israel to boost its ability to defend herself against those who wish to destroy her. This request for \$2.55 billion is the first installment of the new, landmark ten-year, \$30 billion agreement between the U.S. and Israel which represents the instigation of a memorandum of understanding between the two countries whereby all foreign aid to Israel is earmarked exclusively for security. Because the United States has historically been willing to assist Israel in meeting her security needs it would be easy to take this aid for granted and to assume that it comes from, "our power and the might of our hands." In reality, nothing can be farther from the truth.

In this year's politically charged climate it is easy to overlook certain crucial issues. Do not forget to remind our representatives how important foreign aid is. This security assistance represents tangible support that greatly enhances Israel's security. We can never allow ourselves to take its passage for granted. ■

An Olive (Oil) Branch

Tzav et B'nai Yisrael v'yikhu elicha shemen zayit "Command the Children of Israel, that they bring to you pure olive oil" (Leviticus 24:2)

Normally when thinking of foreign oil our minds conjure high gas prices, the OPEC cartel, or even the Arab-Israel conflict. Yet when the subject is not petroleum, but rather olive oil, that oil can be a force for cooperation instead of conflict.

Olive oil plays a prominent part in our *parashah*. Towards the end of the *parashah* the Torah commands Moshe to collect olive oil from the nation for the kindling of the *menorah* in the tabernacle. Yet, this seems to be repetitive. The Torah had already commanded Moshe to collect oil from the people for that very same purpose. In Exodus 27:20, the Torah issues the demand: “And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring unto you pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually.” So why issue the same commandment twice?

Ramban (on 24:2) suggests that the first call for oil came during the initial request for voluntary submission of materials for the construction of the tabernacle. By the time of our *parashah*, that original oil had run dry and the tabernacle required new oil. Therefore, Ramban explains, “the Torah commands that the Jewish people take communal pure olive oil like the original oil.” Thus, the burden to supply the oil for the tabernacle shifts from the donations of volunteers to the responsibility of the community.

Fortunately today, Israelis and Palestinians working together could easily supply the necessary fine oil for use in the tabernacle. Recently, due to a growing international demand for olive oil, Israelis have begun partnering with Palestinians in order to develop some of the world’s premium olive oils. This traditionally Palestinian sector is being updated with Israeli technology and marketing to produce oils that rival the highest quality oils from France, Spain or Italy. In fact, a recent conference at Ben Gurion University gathered 150 industry associates from both the Palestinian and Israeli olive oil producing communities to help focus on expanding the development of these highest quality olive oils. Through a partnership between Israelis and Palestinians, both are finding that when they work together the joint effort produces results in product, marketing and sales benefits. Now that’s an oil initiative that anyone can support. ■

An Eye for an Eye?

Ayin tachat Ayin shin tachat shin “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Leviticus 24:20)

The media often report on events in the Middle East, specifically the ongoing fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, as a “cycle of violence”. In essence, one side strikes, the other retaliates to level the playing field, and pain and suffering are spread to all. According to this theory neither side values the lives, well-being or property of the other and there is moral equivalency between aggressor and victim. In fact, when commanding us to extract upon a perpetrator of violence an “eye for an eye,” the Torah seems to justify this vigilante-style justice. Yet, a closer look at the law teaches that this is not what is intended.

The Talmud (*Baba Kama* 84a) clearly and unequivocally states that we never take “an eye for an eye” literally. Instead, we evaluate the value of the damage inflicted on the defendant and extract a monetary payment for that damage. Yet this only brings us to ask the obvious question: if God never wants us to extract vengeance on any act of violence and only wants us to demand payment, then why state that law in such a clearly misleading way? Why teach “an eye for an eye” if the Torah doesn’t really mean it?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that if the Torah explicitly required the payment of money for physical damage that one might be inclined to minimize the importance of the physical abilities of other human beings. Instead of taking care to insure the safety of others, he might take risks with others’ physical well-being saying, “If I injure someone, what’s the difference? I’ll just pay the damages.” For this reason, the Torah tells us “an eye for an eye.” In reality, justice demands that the punishment fit the crime. Yet, because we value human life and the quality of life – even the life of one who injures his fellow man – we don’t actually extract punishment, only payment.

Thus, the commandment to take “an eye for an eye” emphasizes the value of human life while demanding that violence not go unpunished. Rather than justifying a cycle of violence, this law conveys to us just how much we must take care to ensure the safety and well-being of every human life. Indeed, the Israeli Defense Forces take great care to protect the lives and property of Palestinians even when under attack. Israel’s military response in Gaza has been carefully calibrated to reduce rocket fire and ensure the safety of Israeli citizens while at the same time making every effort to limit Palestinian civilian casualties. There is a sharp contrast between Israel’s care and value of Palestinian life with the attitude of Hamas, which steals fuel intended for its citizens in order to manufacture a humanitarian crisis, and intentionally operates in civilian areas.

By cynically using its own citizens as shields to protect its terrorist fighters it is Hamas that shows disregard for Palestinian lives. ■