

JUNE 30, 2008

Parashat Chukat

Keeping Our Commitments

Vayishlach Moshe malachim... – “And Moses sent messengers” (Numbers 20:14)

When it is time for the Jewish people to enter the Land of Israel they pursue the quickest route from the Sinai desert to Israel, through the land of Edom. Moses sent messengers requesting permission to travel through the country but Edom refused, forcing the Jewish people to travel the long route around the country. Why does Moses go to such lengths to avoid confrontation with Edom? We find the straightforward answer in Moses' explanation in Deuteronomy where he describes how God explicitly instructs him to avoid confrontation with Edom (the descendant of Esau), “because I have given Mount Seir unto Esau for a possession.” (Deuteronomy 2:5) Rashbam explains, “for this reason he informs them at this point that the Holy One did not desire [them to fight] for He had already given [this land to Edom].” It would have been easier for the people to fight their way through the shorter path or at least traverse Edom by force, however, because God had committed to giving Edom to the descendants of Esau, God demands that the Israelites respect that commitment and refrain from attacking.

In commanding Moses to respect the property of Edom the Torah teaches an important lesson about honoring one's word and keeping commitments. This lesson is particularly relevant in regards to the recent activities in Gaza.

While Israel has adhered to its commitments in the recent Egyptian mediated effort to reduce hostilities Hamas has not. In direct violation of Hamas' commitment to Egypt to halt all terror activity from in and around Gaza, a half dozen Qassam rockets and mortars slammed into Sderot last week, shattering several days of calm along the Israel-Gaza border. Israel, in accordance with her commitment to Egypt, had begun to significantly increase the amount of food, medicine and other goods entering Gaza, though border crossings were shut down after Hamas violated its own commitments. While Israel has shown extreme restraint in the face of rocket and other terrorist attacks Israeli officials have said that they are prepared for military action, and are fully aware that, as Hamas leaders have said in the past, a “tahadiya” often serves as a mere “tactic” in their war against Israel. If Hamas wants the Egyptian effort to succeed it must demonstrate its commitment to the mediation by respecting its obligations.

Just as the Torah tells of Moses honoring God's promise to Edom, so too should Hamas honor its commitment and halt all terror activity from in and around the Gaza Strip. ■

Every Single Captive

V'yeishev mimenu shevi – “and [they] took some of them captive” (Numbers 21:1)

The Torah tells us how the King of Arad “fought against Israel and took some of them captive.” The rabbis in the Midrash present different views on how many captives were taken during the fighting. Targum Yonatan translates the verse to mean that “he took many captives.” Yalkut Shimoni, quoted by Rashi and others notes the curious form and the extraneous nature of the word for captives, *shevi*, and explains that the King of Arad only took one captive – a single Jewish maid. The nation's response is immediate. They promise God that should they return victorious with the captives safely redeemed they would forswear personal profit from the battle and dedicate the gains to God.

Yalkut Shimoni's explanation conveys to us the value that the Jewish people place on every single captive. Today this significance is emphasized as we witness an agreement involving two IDF soldier's held in captivity.

Two years ago, on June 25, 2006, more than nine months after Israel withdrew all residents and security personnel from the Gaza Strip, Hamas terrorists crossed into Israeli territory killing two IDF soldiers and capturing Corporal Gilad Shalit. Hardly two weeks later, on July 12, Hizballah terrorists breached the Israeli border killing three soldiers and capturing First Sergeant Eldad Regev and Master Sergeant Ehud Goldwasser. This week the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced, "The Israeli government... approved the outline for the agreement on releasing the abducted soldiers in Lebanon: The abducted soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev will be returned to Israel..." For the Regev and Goldwasser families this marks the beginning of a process that will finally allow them to put closure to their ordeal. Yet, the Shalit family continues to suffer, waiting for their son's return. Stressing the commitment of the Israeli government to bringing home all of the captive soldiers, including Gilad Shalit, IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi said, "I would like to emphasize...that it is our moral and long-time obligation to do everything in our power to bring back all our soldiers that have been captured by the enemy while performing their duties as fighters and protectors of the state of Israel."

While we continue to pray for the speedy return of all IDF soldiers held in captivity we must remember the importance that the Torah places in every single Jewish life, and strengthen our commitment to secure the release of every IDF captive. ■

Peace First

Vayishlach Yisrael malachim el Sichon – “And Israel sent messengers to Sichon” (Numbers 21:21)

As the Children of Israel progressed toward the Promised Land they once again were forced to traverse a hostile territory. Moses sent a message to Sichon, the king of the Emori, asking to pass through his land. The request was denied and a military confrontation ensued in which Israel destroyed the army of Emori. If the Children of Israel were willing to use force, why then did they send messengers? Rashi explains that "even though they were not commanded [to make] peace, they sought peace." The Midrash Yelamdeinu records a conversation between God and Moses. God asks Moses, "I tell you to attack, and you send messengers for peace?" Moses explains, "God – I learned from You... You first sent me to Pharaoh [in peace]." Said God, "You have done well. From this point on, when the people of Israel wish to attack a city, they may not until they first open with words of peace." While the Jewish nation reserves the right to defend its national interests, it has always sought foremost to deal with its neighbors in peace.

This Midrash reinforces the Jewish ideal that Israel should live with her neighbors in peace. This concept is one of the shared values that cement the strong relationship between the United States and Israel which was recently reinforced.

In June, the United States Senate proclaimed overwhelming support for the U.S.-Israel relationship by sending a letter to President Bush, highlighting Israel's peace efforts and reaffirming Israel's right to self-defense. This bipartisan letter, signed by seventy-seven members of the Senate, including presumptive Republican Presidential nominee, John McCain, was reinforced by an additional message from presumptive Democratic Presidential nominee, Barack Obama. These letters urged the President to call on the Arab states to demonstrate their support for historic compromise and reconciliation with Israel on the part of the Palestinians, while isolating Hamas and other rejectionists. Obama clearly opens his letter stating, "A fundamental principle of America's Middle East policy must be our unshakable commitment to Israel's security." Stating that the United States must continue our strong support for the Jewish state in the face of continued threats the Senate also sent the President a powerful message, "We urge you to continue your efforts to advance the Israel/Palestinian negotiations, to support Israel's right to self defense...and to demand that the Arab states do more to support those negotiations." Click [here](#) to read the Senate letter or [here](#) to read the Obama letter.

These declarations from more than two-thirds of the Senate reaffirm the message of Moses, that Israel is a nation of peace and that peace is the first choice, is paramount in that dangerous and unpredictable part of the world. ■

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