

JUNE 23, 2008

Parashat Korach

Pursuing Peace

Vayakam Moshe vayelech... – “And Moses got up and he went” (Numbers 16:25)

In chapter 6, verses 12 and 13 of our *parashah* we see Aaron’s sons, Datan and Aviram, subject Moses, to disrespect by accusing him of gross mismanagement in leading the people and claim that his ultimate goal is his own personal aggrandizement. Later, when God tells Moses to warn the people to abandon the camp of Korach to avoid becoming included in his punishment, the Torah tells us that, “Moses got up and he went to Datan and Aviram...” Why does the Torah tell us that Moses “got up and went” instead of simply relaying what he said? Furthermore, why did Moses go to Datan and Aviram after they treated him so poorly? Ohr Hachayim explains that Moses acts upon the principles of “pride goes before the fall” (Proverbs 16:18) and “honor goes before humility.” (Proverbs 15:33) While Moses had every right to insist that they appear before him in order to give them God’s message instead “he lowered himself and went to them,” because he was willing to forgo his own pride in the interest of saving Jewish lives.

Moses’ willingness to reach out and appeal to his enemy ultimately averred further loss of life. Today, the State of Israel is also hoping that, through mediation by neighboring countries with whom it has good relations, she too can pursue peace and avoid violence.

Israel has shown extreme restraint in the face of ongoing rocket and other terrorist attacks emanating from Gaza. However, like every other sovereign nation, Israel has the right and responsibility to defend its citizens if these attacks continue. With this in mind Israel has implemented an Egyptian mediated effort to reduce hostilities and stop the terror emanating from Gaza. The arrangement is dependent on a total halt of rocket fire and all cross fence terror activity from Gaza by not just Hamas but all other actors as well. As this and other critical conditions for calm are met - including an end to Hamas’ weapons smuggling into Gaza and positive steps toward the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit - Israel will gradually increase the flow of non-humanitarian goods through Gaza’s crossings. However, we must be aware that should the calm not materialize, Israeli officials have said they are preparing 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.

By implementing the Egyptian mediation efforts ultimately Israel is following the lesson of Moses. In spite of a myriad of obstacles and insults, and in the wake of violence and provocation, Israel has consistently taken risks for and demonstrated her desire to achieve peace. ■

Neighbors of the Wicked

Suru na me’al oholei ha’anashim ha’eleh – “Depart please from the tents of these evil men” (Numbers 16:26)

Following Korach’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron’s leadership God instructs Moses to warn the people to “raise themselves up from the dwelling of Korach, Datan and Aviram.” (16:24) Rather than immediately turning to the entire nation Moses runs to the people associated with the three co-conspirators to warn them to leave the rebellious group, “lest you be swept away in all their sins.” (16:26) The Midrash explains that from this episode we see a source

for the rule, “Woe is to the wicked, woe is to his neighbor.” The Mishnah (Negaim 12:6) tells us that when a home becomes infected with tzara’at, the resident must remove all the bricks that have come in contact with the infected area. If he shares that wall with a neighbor, his neighbor must assist in removing the stones, scraping the walls and bringing other stone. Rabbi Pinchas Kehati in his commentary on the Mishnah explains that, “Since his neighbor must assist in his burdens, we see that the neighbor of a wicked person can expect to share in his punishment.”

The lesson of the Mishnah applies not only to geographic neighbors, who may share a wall or fence, but also to ideological neighbors who share a view of the world.

This lesson applies most explicitly to the Turkey mediated indirect talks between Israel and Syria. In order to achieve peace with Israel and avoid being an outcast of the international community Syria must disassociate itself from the Iranian regime that continues to disregard her commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In addition Syria must demonstrate a willingness to match Israel’s commitment to peace by curtailing its strategic ties with Iran and ending its support for Hizballah, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups, which operate freely in Damascus. Israel’s indirect talks with Syrian representatives will only bear fruit with a partner who is willing to disentangle itself from the radical Islamic regimes in the Middle East. Israel has repeatedly expressed its desire to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict with all its neighbors, and has voiced its willingness to make painful sacrifices in order to achieve that objective.

If Syria wants to enjoy the benefits of normal membership in the international community it must reject its wicked neighbor and embrace the values of peace, freedom and nonviolence. ■

Seeds of the Past and the Future

Hashev et match Aharon... l’mishmeret – “Return the staff of Aaron...as a safeguard” (Numbers 17:25)

Following the standoff with Korach, and a plague in the camp, God instructs Moshe to have the leader of each tribe, together with Aaron plant a staff in the ground in front of the Tent of Meeting. Whichever staff sprouted forth indicated God’s choice to represent the Jewish nation. The next morning they discover Aaron’s staff blooming flowers and almonds, clearly and peacefully indicating Aaron as God’s choice for the priesthood. God instructs Moses to place Aaron’s staff as a “safeguard” to prevent the people from rebelling against God in the future. Yet, this is no temporary safeguard. The Midrash Sechel Tov (on Exodus 17) tells us that when the priest, Hilkiyahu, foresaw the imminent destruction of the Temple he hid away the vessels of the Temple together with the flask of Mannah and the flowered staff of Aaron. “This teaches us,” says the Midrash, “that he hid all of [these items] in one place, and they will be future returned to use for Israel.”

Just as the miraculous blooming of Aaron’s staff indicated the power of blossoms to heal the rift of leadership so too today has a “miraculous” bloom given new hope for healing powers.

Israeli scientist recently revived a date palm seed that was retrieved from the rubble of Masada. The seed, which was germinated nearly three years ago, is about 2,000 years old and has sprouted to nearly three feet high according to a New York Times report. The sprouting of the seed is very exciting because, as one of the scientist leading the project said, the “research could lead to the discovery of new medicines that will benefit future generations” claiming that, “it may reveal medicinal qualities that have disappeared from modern cultivated varieties,” according to an Associated Press article. The scientists hope that it may hold promise for the future, like the anti-malarial treatment artemisinin, developed out of a traditional Chinese plant treatment, and a cancer medicine made from the bark of the Pacific Yew tree. This amazing Israeli achievement is even more astounding when compared to the previous oldest-seed-ever-to-sprout record holder, a lotus found in China, by about 700 years.

Just as the staff of Aaron was able to heal some of the wounds caused by Korach’s insurrection so too can modern technology awaken ancient seeds for healing benefit. ■