

JULY 28, 2008

Parashat Masei

Flattery and Economic Sanctions

Velo tachanifu et ha'aretz... – “and you shall not desecrate the land” (Numbers 35:33)

In its simplest terms the prohibition of *chanifah* forbids the taking of a bribe to pardon a murderer of his sentence. God explicitly forbids this practice, “for the blood will bring guilt upon the land; the land will not have atonement for the blood that was spilled in it...” (35:33) The Midrash, in Sifrei 161, broadens this notion of *chanifah* to refer to all types of inappropriate flattery, admonishing one who gives honor and respect to those who do not deserve it – “for we should [not] flatter and exalt [those who are evil] for their greater status or their strength or their family honor, even without explicitly taking bribes from them.” *Orchot Tzaddikim* (gate 24) explains that the malevolence of flattery lays in the fact that our willingness to associate with wicked people perpetrates evil in the world. Instead of encouraging the sinner to repent and change his ways, one who flatters the wicked or even associates with him not only helps that person continue in his evil ways, but actually encourages others to follow in his footsteps.

By not standing up to wrongdoers we are actively encouraging them to continue their misdeeds. This concept does not just apply to people but also in a broader sense to peoples, nations and countries. In recent years many countries have found themselves guilty of this sin by continuing to do business with the nation of Iran. Yet recent developments show that a countervailing trend is beginning to have a major impact in the struggle to stop Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Every country that does business with Iran bolsters her ability and will to continue her pursuit of nuclear weapons. European companies, discouraged by heightened tensions and U.S. sanctions over Iran's nuclear program, have shelved plans for multi-billion-dollar liquefied natural gas export projects in the country. When the French energy giant Total recently announced that it would pull out of a major investment in Iran, one prominent Middle East energy expert, Samuel Cizuk, called the decision “a death blow” for Iran’s liquid natural gas ambitions. This is a major development. Isolation and pressure, both political and economic, remain the most effective way to deter Iran from continuing its pursuit of nuclear technology. Isolating Iran not only hampers its ability to function and grow economically, it also sends the clear message that her pursuit of nuclear technology is in violation of her obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and against the will of the international community. Due to current sanctions Iran is already faced with growing difficulties: diminishing foreign investments, declining oil production, rising domestic energy consumption, international isolation, domestic economic instability and political unease.

We must continue to encourage international sanctions which remain the best way to persuade Iran to forgo its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Failure to do so would constitute the worst form of *chanifah*, and aid Iran’s nuclear ambitions. ■

Modern-Day Thorns and Pins

L’sikim beineichem – “as pins in your eyes” (Numbers 33:55)

When encouraging the Jewish nation to conquer the Land of Israel Moses warns them to resist leaving remnants of the enemy within the boundaries of the land. The Torah quotes, “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those of whom you shall leave shall be as *sikim* in your eyes and *tzninim* at your sides, and they will harass you upon the land in which you dwell.” (33:55) What is the meaning of the words *sikim* and *tzninim*? Most

commentators, including Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and others, interpret these words to refer to thorns or pins – long sharp object that have the ability to poke out the eyes, or scratch at one’s sides, inflicting great harm and damage. Thus, Moses warns the Jewish people of the danger of leaving an enemy within striking range, for the enemy will take advantage of every opportunity to strike at the Jewish nation and inflict harm whenever possible.

Today, the thorns and pins described by Moses so many years ago remind us of the missiles and rockets now being hoarded by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hizballah in Lebanon.

In direct violation of Hamas' commitment to Egypt to halt all terror activity from and around Gaza, Israeli officials have said that weapons smuggling across the Gaza-Egypt border has not stopped. Additionally, more than 20 Qassam rockets and mortars have slammed into Sderot since the calm along the Israel-Gaza border began. Israel has shown extreme restraint in the face of rocket and other terrorist attacks from Gaza, however, like every other sovereign nation, Israel has the right and responsibility to defend its citizens if these attacks continue. Simultaneously, on the northern border, in direct violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, Hizballah has tripled the size of its arsenal, amassing more than 40,000 rockets and missiles. These weapons, smuggled from Iran and Syria, have come through despite the watch of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) observers. Iran and Syria have also stationed advanced radar systems atop a mountain range in central Lebanon, allowing Hizballah to detect Israeli aircraft. The U.N. and the international community must take further action to disarm Hizballah in order to prevent another outbreak of war and to help stabilize Lebanon

All too often Hamas and Hizballah have both shown their willingness to use their modern day “thorns” and “pins” to kill and injure innocent civilians. If peace will ever be achieved in the region these terrorist groups must stop living as “enemies” focused on amassing weapons and instead spur violence and recognize Israel’s right to exist. ■

A Sea of Miracles

Vehaya lachem hayam hagadol u’gevu! – “the Great Sea shall be the border” (Numbers 34:6)

In our *parashah* the Torah lists the various borders of the Land of Israel including amongst them the “Great Sea,” clearly referring to the Mediterranean. The Talmud (Gittin 8a) contemplates the curious language in the verse, particularly the hanging “*u’gevu!*” at the end. The Talmud explains that this language is used to include the *nissin* in the Sea as part of the Land of Israel. What are these *nissin* the Talmud refers to? Rashi, Rashbam and others explain that this word refers to the islands in the Mediterranean, some of which actually have the status of the Land of Israel in the Torah. Additionally, the word *nissin* (also see Rashbam on verse 6 who calls them *nissim* in the male form) means “miracles” and refers to marvels of the sea.

One wonders which miracles can be found in the Mediterranean that prompts the Torah to call it the “Great Sea.” Perhaps the rabbis in the Talmud foreshadowed the technological miracles of modern-times, such as the advances of an Israeli business which is developing a fresh solution to energy concerns, by harnessing the power of the sea.

The Israeli company S.D.E. Energy recently developed an innovative technology for generating electricity from sea waves. “The Tel Aviv company's system produces renewable and clean energy from sea waves, which it claims have the potential to supply four times more energy per square meter than wind power,” reports to the website Israel21c. The story further explains that, “The system's advantages are high efficiency, ability to modulate energy storage capabilities, and relatively low cost for construction and generation of electricity. The first commercial, full-scale model of the system, capable of generating 40 electrical kilowatts (eKW) has been working successfully for a year and is located at the Jaffa Port in Tel Aviv-Yafo” – in the Mediterranean Sea – the *Yam Hagadol*.

Today’s energy-starved world is desperately searching for alternatives to fossil fuels and this new technology holds great promise. With this kind of Israeli innovation perhaps the official Hebrew name of the Mediterranean should change from *Yam Hagadol* – the “Great Sea”, to *Yam Nissim* – a true “Sea of Miracles.” ■