

AUGUST 4, 2008

Parashat Devarim

Shabbat Chazon

Tzion b'mishpat tipadeh... – “Zion shall be redeemed through justice...” (Isaiah 1:27)

We call the Shabbat before Tisha B'av “*Shabbat Chazon*,” after the first word of the haphtarah in which Isaiah predicts the destruction of the first Temple. Isaiah laments the sad state of the Jewish people and their impending defeat ascribing this coming calamity to the absence of justice. Isaiah repeatedly refers to the deficiency of justice and the oppression of widows and orphans: “Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (verse 17); “they judge not the fatherless; neither does the cause of the widow come unto them.” Isaiah’s emphasis on the interests of the widow, the orphan and the oppressed reminds us of the great obligations and responsibilities inherent in positions of power. Instead of allowing the weak to fall prey to those who threaten them, those that seek justice should look to use their power to protect the interests of those who cannot fully protect themselves.

Today this value of pursuing justice and helping those in need is being put to practice. While Israel has a vibrant economy she also faces a growing number of security challenges that threaten her very existence. To help her ally meet these pressures the U.S. has committed to assist Israel in confronting the resulting financial burden.

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile areas in the world and Israel, the only democracy in the region, often finds itself in a position of diplomatic, economic and military vulnerability when dealing with its adversaries. Israel currently spends more on defense as a percentage of gross domestic product than any other major industrialized nation, nearly double what the United States spends. Implementation of a 2007 U.S.-Israeli security agreement, which pledges to provide Israel with \$30 billion in military assistance during the next decade, is vital to ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge over those adversaries that threaten the Jewish state and actively work to undermine U.S. interests in the region. This summer, Congress passed and the president signed into law, legislation locking in the first year of the administration’s requested increase in security assistance to Israel, which is expected to total \$2.55 billion in fiscal year 2009. Israel has committed to a plan of sustained increases in its own defense spending to accompany the expected growth in U.S. security assistance and is slated to spend \$150 billion on defense during the next decade, a 50 percent increase over the previous 10-year period.

This type of ongoing support is a testament to the United States’ commitment to justice, protecting a threatened ally and more broadly to the strong US-Israel relationship. It also gives new meaning to Isaiah’s prophetic words: “Zion shall be redeemed with justice.” ■

Fighting Like Bees

Ka’asher ta’asenah ha’devorim – “As the bees do” (Deuteronomy 1:44)

In describing the battle between the Amorites and the Jewish people Moses notes that without God’s divine blessing the people suffer a bitter defeat. Moses reminds them that, “the Amorites...came out against you and chased you as bees do.” What does Moses mean when he compares the Amorite fighters to bees? Rashi explains: “Just like the bee, when she stings a human being she immediately dies, so too the Amorites – when they touch you, they immediately die.” According to Rashi’s interpretation, the Amorites realized that their attack on the Children of Israel would

ultimately bring about their own destruction. Yet, they attacked nonetheless, unaffected by the consequences of their actions and the resulting self destruction.

Unfortunately, this mentality of following a course of action no matter how self defeating is still alive today. Like busy bees Iran's government has been hard at work to develop nuclear technology, and like the bees mentioned by Moses Iran seems unconcerned with the repercussions.

Iran has been working vigorously on its nuclear program and recently announced that it now has six thousand centrifuges working to enrich uranium, the critical component for the production of nuclear weapons. While the United States and five other countries recently offered Iran an incentives package aimed at halting the country's uranium enrichment activities it seems that the Iranians have already rejected the offer. As Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khameni, said "The Iranian nation by depending on its useful experience and advantages of 30 years of resistance does not pay any attention to such talk of suspension and will continue with its path." As Iran has left itself extremely vulnerable to political and economic pressure the international community must use sanctions to persuade Iran to forgo her pursuit of nuclear weapons. In fact, the United States and our allies need to aggressively spearhead international efforts to impose tougher sanctions on Iran, including a ban on the sale of refined petroleum products, in order to further isolate and pressure the regime to change course.

For too long Iran has ignored her obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency and continued her pursuit of nuclear weapons. It seems that Iran wishes to follow in the footsteps of the Amorite nation and attack "as the bees do," with blatant disregard for her self interests. The United States must continue to press for further economic sanctions and ensure that unlike the Amorites, Iran never gets the opportunity. ■

The Protection of Kindness

Vayomer Hashem elai al tira oto – "And God said to me, do not be afraid of him" (Deuteronomy 3:2)

Reviewing the battle with Og Moses remembers God's admonishment not to fear entering into battle with him. Why should Moses fear Og? The Talmud in Berachot 54b teaches us that Moses himself was ten amot tall, carried a sword ten amot long, jumped ten amot high, and struck Og...on his ankle. Certainly Og presented an intimidating adversary. Yet the Talmud in Niddah 61a explains that Moses feared not Og's size, but his merit. In addition to being quite large, the Talmud considers Og quite old, teaching us that when a messenger came to inform Abraham about the capture of Lot in Sodom that messenger was in fact Og himself. Thus, Moses feared that for performing this act of kindness by informing Abraham about his nephew's captivity Og might be protected in his battle with Israel.

Thus we witness the power of *chessed*. Moses feared that a single act of kindness, performed hundreds of years ago, could have the power to protect a tyrant in battle with the Jewish people. Of course performing acts of kindness is not limited to the Torah or Og and nowadays kindness is recognized as a Jewish value and expressive of the Israeli ethic.

Today Israel is invoking this concept of *chessed* by providing critical medical assistance in the form of life saving heart surgeries. The Israeli based international humanitarian project, Save a Child's Heart (SACH), has been working to help save children from around the world by providing life saving surgeries and follow up care. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "SACH is a hospital based project whose services are provided in Israel...by a team of 70 dedicated experts who, from chief surgeon to physiotherapist, contribute a substantial portion of their time without any payment from SACH...patients, whose ages range from infants to teenagers, come from the "Four Corners of The Earth": from St. Vincent and Ecuador in the American Continent to China and Vietnam in the Far East; from Russia and Ukraine to Ethiopia and Zanzibar; from Jordan, Iraq and the Palestinian Authority to Nigeria and Congo – 2000 children from 33 different locations to date."

Even Og, in his eagerness to engage the Jewish people in battle was remembered for an act of kindness. The acts of kindness being performed in Israel today continue to demonstrate the Jewish ethic of helping the less fortunate and reinforce that Israel is a country that believes in *chessed*. ■

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