

AUGUST 25, 2008

Parashat Re'eh

Gifts of Goodwill

Aser ta'aser... – “You shall surely tithe” (Deuteronomy 14:22)

A series of four *mitzvot* in Parashat Re'eh teach us to be charitable and giving: First, we read of how to tithe our produce for *ma'aser sheni* – the second tithe taken to Jerusalem for consumption. Next, the Torah describes *ma'aser ani*, the tithe dedicated to the poor. Third, we learn of the release of debts, granted to debtors after the seventh year of the *shemittah* cycle. Finally, we must act charitably and give willingly to the needy and destitute. Rabbi Yitzchak Arama in his commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak* explains this series of verses as a *mitzvah* to act counter to human nature. Because we are reluctant to part with something, “the text proceeds in ascending order of difficulty. First the various tithes...because man is naturally reluctant to part with his own...[finally] an even more difficult demand is made upon man's nature – that he give something away from the very outset with no intention of getting it back.”

While there are many forms of giving clearly the hardest type is the dispersal for the sake of helping others, while not receiving anything in return. It is this highest form of giving that Israel recently demonstrated when she announced the release of nearly 200 Palestinian prisoners currently in custody.

The Israeli Government has approved the release of Palestinian prisoners in the hope of promoting dialogue with pragmatic elements who are both engaged in diplomacy with Israel and opposed to terrorism. The prisoners will come from the ranks of those factions that support the leadership of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “As a confidence-building measure vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority, the Government of Israel decided...to release approximately 200 Palestinian prisoners in accordance to the criteria set by previous government decisions.” Israel has consistently expressed her desire for peace and has repeatedly demonstrated her commitment to resolving the conflict with all of her neighbors. This prisoner release represents a significant effort to bolster PA President Abbas and build trust between Israel and the PA. The Arab states must now give President Abbas the political cover to pursue and continue negotiations with Israel, and to fight terrorism. They must also take steps to isolate Hamas, while laying the groundwork for historic political compromise by the Palestinians.

Israel's decision to release these prisoners is an important act of support for the PA. While it is, in *Akeidat Yitzchak's* words, “difficult” to make such gestures to foster goodwill, ultimately this act of giving serves to demonstrate Israel's commitment to peace. ■

The Power of the Individual

Re'eh anochi noten lifneichem – “Behold I set before you...” (Deuteronomy 11:26)

Re'eh begins with a contradiction: on one hand, Moses speaks to each individual: *re'eh* – “Behold” – in the singular, offering him the choice of blessing or curse. Yet, in that very same phrase, Moses places this blessing *lifneichem* – “I set before you a blessing and a curse” – in the plural. This begs the question, is Moses speaking to the individual or to the entire community? Rabbi Haim Kasufi, (known as the Ba'al Ha'nes) explains that Moses refers to both, and

teaches us the impact that one person can have on the world around him or her. If a single person “sees”, and sets in his heart to fulfill an additional mitzvah, he or she can actually bring about great joy and light for the entire nation.

This concept of an individual enhancing the greater good is an important reminder of our place in the world. By working to make the world a better place each of us has the ability to positively impact the lives of many people. Nowadays this notion is being put to practice by two Israeli scientists from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU), who are out to change the world.

Recently the website Isarel21c reported on Dr. Leslie Lobel and Professor Robert Marks, both of BGU, who are helping to overcome the numerous infectious diseases that plague Africa. The scientists list a host of reasons for the lack of success in battling these diseases to date, from the expense of medicine, “to the fact that some vaccines against viral disease do not include the local African strains and treatments are...not formulated to function under African reality which includes lack of available refrigeration and clean water.” The website explains that, “by working hand-in-hand with African scientists, Lobel and Marks hope to create a world-class consortium based in Africa, which will transfer existing technology and develop new technologies for treatment...of infectious diseases prioritized by the African scientists themselves...It is meant to turn the traditional pattern 180 degrees around and get the African scientists themselves involved in determining what are the medical and scientific needs for each community.”

The work of these two Israeli scientists has the potential to save thousands of lives each year. By working to end the spread of infectious diseases in Africa they are truly embodying Moses’ lesson: that each individual not only affects himself but can have a powerful impact on the world around him. ■

Behind Green Eyes

Ki yihyeh becha evyon – “If there should be someone destitute in your midst” (Deuteronomy 15:7)

The word *evyon* in our verse refers to a poor person, instructing us to help the destitute with whatever he or she may need. Yet Ibn Ezra explains that the word *evyon* doesn’t only mean the poor. Rather, it derives from the word *avah*, meaning “desire.” Thus, the word *evyon* refers to “one who desires all that he does not have.” While the word applies to the poor or destitute, it also applies to anyone who is desirous of what he or she may not possess. As Ibn Ezra notes, the Torah uses the word *avah* to describe the feelings of the enemies of the Children of Israel, telling us regarding Pharaoh, *velo avah leshalcham*, “He did not desire to send [the Jewish nation].” Ultimately, this “desire for that which you may not possess” is more than jealously, it is a harbinger of hatred.

This desire for the unattainable led to hatred and ultimately inspired Pharaoh and others in their aspiration to destroy the Jewish people. Today, there are still those who use this same motivation in seeking to destroy the Jewish State.

Of all those adversaries who wish to destroy the State of Israel none is as close to developing the capability to do so as Iran, who recently test-fired a new rocket capable of carrying a satellite into orbit. The White House condemned the act, noting that it marks a pattern of Iranian activity to build a nuclear weapon and the means to deliver it. “The Iranian development and testing of rockets is troubling and raises further questions about their intentions,” said White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe. This development is particularly troubling because, according to rocket scientists, the same technology that puts satellites into orbits can deliver military warheads. This precarious activity serves to remind us of Iran’s dangerous intentions and emphasizes the need for the U.N. Security Council to impose a fourth round of sanctions against the Islamic Republic for its refusal to halt the country’s uranium enrichment activity.

Iran has ignored significant economic sanctions and pursued a vigilant struggle against its own financial and national interests in order to pursue uranium enrichment. If the world fails to act now, then the word *evyon* will refer not to Iran, but to the “destitution” of the international community, forced to deal with a nuclear-armed Iranian regime. ■