

SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

Parashat Nitzavim

Self-Blessing

Shalom Yihiyeh Li – “Peace will be my lot...” (Deuteronomy 29:17)

In warning the Jewish people to remain vigilant against the threat of idolaters infiltrating the nation, Moses tells the people, “Perhaps there is among you a man or a woman or a family or a tribe whose thoughts stray today from [being] with the Lord, our G-d, to go serve the gods of those nations...When he hears the statements of this oath-curse, he will imagine self-blessings, saying, “Peace will be my lot when I shall follow what my thoughts envision.” (29:17-18) How can someone aware of God’s curses nevertheless consider himself blessed? Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, author of the Kuzari explains that while an individual who worships idols truly brings a curse upon himself, his temporary well-being allows him to imagine himself excluded from the punishments guaranteed to idol worshippers. But as the Torah vividly explains, these imagined blessings will be short lived, and soon the idolater’s actions will catch up to him through Divine retribution.

Iran too, has continued to bless itself in its heart with its continued pursuit of nuclear capabilities, unconcerned with the will of the international community and the threats of further economic sanctions. Iran has rebuffed multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding that it abandon efforts to enrich uranium. But, like the idolater of our parshah, Iran’s “self-blessing” will soon come to a close.

In the past weeks, French President Nicolas Sarkozy warned Iran it was taking a dangerous gamble by continuing its illicit atomic work, Reuters reported. “If Iran continues enrichment, that is a problem,” Sarkozy said during a meeting in Damascus with the leaders of Syria, Turkey and Qatar. “Iran is taking a major risk in continuing the process to obtain a military nuclear capacity.” The United Nations Security Council, which agreed in March 2008 to impose additional measures if Iran did not suspend its nuclear activity within 90 days, must pursue a fourth round of sanctions on Tehran.

The time has come for the world to end Iran’s self-blessing. Iran must only be capable of saying, “Peace be my lot,” when it halts its nuclear enrichment program and convinces the world that peace is what it truly desires. ■

Making a Difference, One Step at a Time

Lo niflait hee... – “It is not too hard for you” (Deuteronomy 30:11)

In describing the notion of keeping the *mitzvot*, Moses seems to couch a rather difficult and challenging goal in simple terms. “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.” Scholars throughout the ages struggle with Moses’ seemingly flippant attitude towards fulfilling the words of Torah. How does he refer to the most difficult of life’s tasks – keeping *mitzvot* – as simple and easy? One answer, suggested by the Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 8) focuses not on the goal, but the task. The Midrash explains that we truly can accomplish great things if we do them one step at a time. “Said the Rabbis, the fool is someone who enters the synagogue and sees the people immersed in Torah, and says to them, ‘How does a person begin to study Torah?’ They tell him, ‘First you study the scrolls, and then the Chumash, then the prophets, then the writings. And when you finish the Bible, you

study the Talmud, and then the law, and then the Agadah.' Upon hearing this he says to himself, 'When will I be able to study all this?' So he walks out. Yet, someone intelligent – what does he do? He studies one chapter each and every day until he finishes the entire Torah. Regarding this person God says, 'It is not too hard for you.'"

Often a goal appears unreachable because we focus on the end result, and not the task itself. We consider others' accomplishments as too great for us to achieve because the mountain seems too difficult to climb. The Midrash reminds us that we need not climb the mountain. All we need to do is take one step at a time.

What's true for Torah study and religious growth applies equally to all areas of life. How many of us feel impotent to change policy in Washington? How many of us really feel like we can truly make a difference to our Representative or Senator? So, instead of making our voices heard, we assume that we'll be neglected and never make the phone call, or send the email in support of Israel.

Moses reminds us that doing great things and making a real difference requires that we focus not on the final goal, but on each simple step. Every phone call really does have an effect. Every email is read and tallied. Each contact builds a relationship with our elected officials that will strengthen the U.S.-Israel alliance. And when we make simple, small steps on a consistent basis, we will truly find the wisdom of Moses' words, that making a difference really is, "not too hard" for each of us. ■

The Guardians of Jerusalem

Al Chomotayich Yerushalayim – “Upon your walls, O Jerusalem” (Isaiah 62:6)

In this week's haftarah, one of the *shivah d'nichemta*, the seven haftarot of consolation that follow Tisha B'av, we read the comforting words of Isaiah, who prophesizes about an era of blessing, safety and well-being for the inhabitants of the Land of Israel. Among his moving words he tells us, "I have set watchmen upon your walls, O Jerusalem, they shall never hold their peace day nor night." Who are these watchmen? How do they protect and defend the city of Jerusalem? Radak presents three possibilities. The first, offered by the Midrash, suggests that these watchmen are angels of God, praying for Jerusalem's rebuilding. The second suggests that Isaiah refers to the Jewish people, who watch over Jerusalem and hope for the complete reconstruction of Zion. Finally, Radak explains that in this verse God refers to Jerusalem not before, but after its reconstruction. Through the words of the prophet God tells us not to fear, for He has placed upon the walls of Jerusalem a constant and vigilant guard to protect it.

Nowadays, we witness the blessings of the protection of these guardians of the walls of Jerusalem both from within Israel and from abroad. While threats to Israel today are greater than ever, the Israel Defense Force and security agencies work diligently to defend its citizens and soldiers despite repeated attacks and attempted terrorist infiltrations. In addition, the United States has been a staunch supporter of a strong Israel, supplying materials, weapons and support to the Israeli military.

Recently, the Pentagon announced that, "The U.S. plans to sell Israel 1,000 buster-bunker bombs which Israeli military experts said could provide a powerful new weapon against underground arsenals in Lebanon or Gaza," the Associated Press reported. "The U.S. Defense Department said the sale of the Boeing GBU-39 smart bombs would be consistent with the U.S. interest of assisting Israel "to develop and maintain a strong and ready self-defense capability." Moreover, in its recommendation to Congress, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency wrote that Israel's strategic position was "vital to the United States' interests throughout the Middle East."

While Radak knew about the prayers of the angels and the hopes and prayers of Jews throughout the century, he would certainly agree that the citizens of the United States can proudly call themselves "Guardians of Jerusalem." ■

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