

SEPTEMBER 29, 2008

Parashat Vayelech – Shabbat Shuvah

Courage and Boldness

Chazak ve'ematz – “Be courageous and bold” (Deuteronomy 31:7)

Moses opens Vayelech with his farewell message to the people he has led for almost forty years. In a message to both the Children of Israel and to Joshua, the next leader, Moses encourages them, “Be courageous and bold, do not fear and do not quake before them” (31:7). Midrash Tanchuma (Shoftim 17) notes that many of our leaders were told to be courageous, citing such examples as Moses advising Joshua and the prophet Deborah instructing her chief of staff Barak. Boldness demands that one make difficult decisions in the face of adversity – and the strength to do what is right despite pressure to capitulate. Good leaders and good leadership demand both the external courage that comes from one’s faith, and the internal boldness to persevere and do what’s right.

With yet another transfer of leadership occurring peacefully, Israel proudly proved itself once again as a region of democratic strength and resilience. Even more striking is the fact that the next presumed leader is a woman – and that Israeli society does not consider this significant. In fact, Israel stands to appoint its second female head of state – without much fanfare. Israel’s first women leader took office over thirty-five years ago, and Tzipi Livni’s rise follows in Golda Meir’s footsteps. If Tzipi Livni becomes Prime Minister then all three major government positions (Prime Minister, Speaker of the Knesset, and Chief Justice) will be held by women.

This past summer, the IDF Chief of Staff Adviser for Women Affairs, Brig. Gen. Yehudit Grisaro, welcomed eleven European and American representatives for a seminar on women in the military. The conference emphasized the significance of integrated women's service in militaries across the world, and provided a forum to share the IDF's experience. After sixty years of female integration, the IDF serves as an example to international armed forces of equal opportunity in a military environment. The IDF opens its doors to the young women of Israel to serve in a large variety of positions, such as pilots, naval officers, infantry soldiers and much more.

Israel has always been a pioneer in equal rights, stressing equal opportunity to all its citizens. The powerful women who take the lead in Israeli society demonstrate their wealth of *chozek* and *ometz* - courage and boldness, attributes Israel proudly promotes and encourages. ■

Bringing the Children

Anashim, nashim vataf... – “Men, women and infants” (Deuteronomy 31:12)

Have you ever wondered why we bring our children into the synagogue? The custom actually emanates from a comment on this week’s parshah. In describing the commandment of *hakhel*, the requirement to read the Torah to the entire nation of Israel, Moses tells us, “Assemble the people, the men, the women and the infants.” The Talmud (Chagigah 3a) wonders: while we can appreciate why the men and women attend the reading of the Torah, why bring the infants? Reish Lakish explains: “In order to give reward to [their parents who] bring them.” Based on this comment, the Tosfot notes that “Jews relied upon this [answer] to bring their children into the synagogue.”

Reish Lakish clues us into a critical message about raising our children with Jewish values. Oftentimes, we shield our children from issues that we feel they might not fully comprehend. We might not want to burden them with complicated matters, so we fail to include them in our activism, volunteerism or even our philanthropy. Yet, *hakhel* reminds us that even when our children are at a tender age, while they might not appreciate the issues, they can certainly absorb the energy of a gathering of people devoted to a worthy cause, and learn a great deal about the power of a community dedicated to a common cause.

As supporters of Israel, we advance the cause of Israel through action and advocacy. While we might view our communal involvement as an “adult” issue, *hakhel* compels us to include our children in our activism and transform it into a family issue. We must explain the importance of standing for a strong Israel from a very young age. We must bring our families to pro-Israel rallies, programs and meetings, and encourage our children to advocate on behalf of Israel.

When we instill values in our children at an early age; when we bring our “infants” to our *hakhel* – our Jewish gatherings - we ensure that these values will motivate and guide them to grow and become powerful forces in the Jewish world. ■

Purim Reminder

Va’anochi haster astir panai – “And I shall surely hide My face...” (Deuteronomy 31:18)

Warning the nation not to fall prey to the enticements of idolatry, God cautions us that should we sin, “I will surely hide my face on that day due to all the evil that they have done.” The Talmud (Hullin 139b) notes a chilling reference that emanates from this verse: “Paponai asked Rabbi Judah: Where is there an allusion to Esther (the Purim story) in the Torah? He answered him, ‘and I shall surely hide.’” Rabbi Judah’s comment alludes to the play on words connecting the name *Esther* to *haster astir* – the root of both meaning “hidden.” Yet, on a deeper level, Esther’s story reminds us of Haman’s blind hatred for the Jewish people, and his willingness to stop at nothing to destroy Jews. The Targum Sheini on Esther (8) tells us that when Haman approaches King Ahashveirosh for permission to destroy the Jews, he tells the king that the Jews are “arrogant, lazy, different, controlling, conniving people who act as they please.” By slandering the Jews he successfully petitions the leader of the free world to annihilate the Jewish people.

Last week, we watched another world figure remind us of the Purim story without the need to allude to the weekly Torah portion. Standing before the General Assembly of the United Nations, “Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad railed against ‘Zionist murderers’ and vowed to resist American bullying and defend Iran’s right to nuclear power,” Reuters reported. “He dwelled on what he described as Zionist control over international ‘financial and monetary centers.’ Israeli President Shimon Peres said, ‘This is the first time in the history of the United Nations that the head of a state is appearing openly and publicly with the ugly and dark accusations of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion.’”

More frightening though, is Iran’s steadfast determination to continue its pursuit of nuclear technology despite three rounds of economic sanctions aimed at halting its nuclear program. Even more ironic is Iran’s recent bid to gain membership in the U.N. Security Council. Commenting on the Iranian President’s speech, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said, “‘What is needed now is to apply international pressure on Iran which would leave no doubt as to the price involved in ignoring the demands of the international community - rather than including Iran in the very body that is spearheading this action.’” The United States must initiate a fourth round of still more severe economic sanctions to bring Iran into compliance with the wishes of the international community.

Jewish history reminds us all too often of God’s “hidden” face – and the terrible consequences of that condition. We must act now to ensure that the President of Iran fails to follow in the footsteps of Haman, his Persian ancestor, so that we tell the tale of Purim about the past, and not the future. ■