



Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 17, 2008

Parashat Chayei Sarah

The Seeds of Democracy

Vayedaber el benei Chet – “And he spoke to the people of Chet” (Genesis 23:3)

Following the death of his wife, Sarah, Abraham sought a proper burial site near Hebron. However, before approaching Efron, the owner of the Cave of Machpelah, Abraham first requested permission from the inhabitants of the area. Abraham implored them, “Give me a possession of a burying-place with you.” (Verse 4) Why did Abraham make his initial request of the residents of the entire city instead of going directly to Efron? Rashbam (On verse 4) explains that Abraham realized that he needed to appease the residents of the entire city, “for a burial plot cannot be granted without the will of all the residents of the city.” Abraham realized the need for communal consensus and a democratic spirit long before the first democratic governments in the world. Despite his wealth and prominence Abraham understood the need to first ascertain the resolve of the people and act upon their wishes.

While this may be one of the first recorded notions of democracy it was certainly not the last. Today, we have seen democracy flourish throughout the world, spreading ideas of equality and justice. Yet, despite the reach of these democratic principles, nowhere are they more vociferously practiced than in America and Israel, two countries which have both recently engaged in the democratic process of selecting new leaders.

With Americans recently going to the polls and choosing President-elect Barack Obama as our next Commander-in-Chief our nation has demonstrated her willingness to select a candidate without any racial prejudice or preference. This hallmark of democracy broadcast to the world our national commitment to the equality of all Americans. Similarly, in Israel, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni, recently won a vote to succeed Ehud Olmert to become the leader of Kadima, meaning Israel may end up with a female Prime Minister. The dedication of these two nations to democratic ideals means that no person is prohibited from reaching the highest offices, regardless of race or sex. Meanwhile, until Knesset elections are held on February 10, 2009, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will continue to play a caretaker role until a new government is formed. During this peaceful transfer of power, Israel stands out as the only established and thriving democracy in the Middle East. This concept of democratic will and peaceful transition of power is something that both countries can take pride in.

It is this shared commitment to democratic principles that has formed the cornerstone of the strong U.S.-Israel relationship. One of the main reasons that Americans overwhelmingly support Israel is the shared values of the two countries. Clearly both nations have learned the lesson of Abraham and established societies based not on privilege of position but rather the will of the people. ■

Building Relationships with Water

Vegam gemalecha ashkeh – “And I will also give your camels drink” (Genesis 24:14)

Sent on a mission to search for a suitable wife for Isaac, Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, devised a test to find Isaac’s *besheret*. Eliezer would ask a woman for water and if she provided for him and also, “say drink and I will give thy camels drink,” she would be the true choice to marry Isaac. This additional exertion of kindness would indicate to

Eliezer that the woman shared the compassion necessary for Isaac's wife. How did Eliezer know that this test would reveal a woman of kindness and virtue? Sforno explains that he simply followed proper etiquette. "For it is worthwhile for the requester to ask for less than his needs so as not to trouble others, and it is worthwhile for the grantor to add and do more than requested to fulfill his true needs." (See Sforno on verse 14) While Eliezer followed protocol asking only for himself, Rebecca demonstrated her generosity by realizing that not only was he thirsty, but that his camels required water as well.

Eliezer used water as a tool to build a meaningful and lasting relationship. Nowadays, Israel and Jordan have followed suit using regional water cooperation to strengthen ties between the two countries.

Since signing the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty in 1994, which also stipulated water cooperation, these two nations have been meeting at the highest levels to discuss water issues. Jordan remains one of the world's ten poorest countries in terms of water per capita. In fact, water runs in Jordan just one day a week, while residents must carefully ration the water they have stored in rooftop containers for the other six days. Following Rebecca's lead, Israel has not only adhered to the terms of the treaty but realizing Jordan's dire water needs, Israel has extended herself on Jordan's behalf. As part of this effort Israel has offered to desalinate water from the Mediterranean and pass it on to Jordan.

In a time when water could be a source of conflict in the Middle East, Israel has followed the model of Rebecca – recognizing Jordan's dire water needs and extending itself to help a friendly neighboring country. This type of cooperation can serve as a model to other neighbors of Israel as well, teaching them the benefits that can come from peace, coexistence and cooperation. ■

A Change of Heart

Vayikberu oto Yitzchak v'Yishmael banav – “And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him” (Genesis 25:9)

Following the death of Abraham we learn that his sons gathered together for his burial. “And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah.” (25:9) Rashi, quoting the Midrash, asks the obvious question: if Abraham had sent Ishmael away many years before how could Ishmael be present for his father's burial? Rashi explains that, “from this we see that Ishmael had repented.” Despite his anger and shame at his rejection by Abraham earlier in life, Ishmael is able to put aside his earlier feelings, change his attitude and share in the burial of his father.

Recently we have witnessed a similar “change of heart” in the attitudes of the descendants of Ishmael, especially regarding the growing Iranian threat. While the world has treated Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons as a direct threat specifically to Israel, Arab leaders realize that the looming danger threatens their own interests and security as well.

During a recent meeting with U.S. and European diplomats, Arab officials expressed their concern that the focus on halting Iran's nuclear ambitions could leave the Islamic Republic's support for terrorist proxies unchecked. The meeting was attended by several Arab states foreign ministers, France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. According to one official present at the meeting several participants appeared shocked at the vehemence of Arab ministers in voicing their concerns over Tehran's threatening behavior. For too many years Arab leaders have parroted anti-Israel rhetoric, blaming the Jewish State for all of their problems. Many of these nations are now realizing that the true threat to peace and prosperity in the Middle East is not Israel, as they have always claimed, but rather the growing threat of Islamic radicalism and the countries that support it.

If these nations truly fear Iranian hegemony in the region they will follow the lead of Ishmael, repent from their antipathy towards Israel, and join forces with the moderate nations of the world who call for Iran to stop sponsoring international terror. ■