



Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 24, 2008

Parashat Toldot

Shared Roots and a Shared Bond

Avraham holid et Yitzchak – “Abraham begot Isaac” (Genesis 25:19)

Our commentators try to explain the odd phrase, “Abraham begot Isaac.” The beginning of the verse, “And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son,” states that Isaac was Abraham’s child. Why add that Abraham “begot” Isaac? Ibn Ezra explains that that the word *holid*, “begot,” really means “teach.” Thus, the second half of the verse explains that Abraham did not just father Isaac, but he also taught him the tradition of ethical monotheism.

In the same way that Abraham “begot” Isaac the Jewish people have begot an American people. America was born out of a moral code based in Jewish teachings: the fundamental rights of man and the freedoms of worship, gathering and expression. Similarly, America played a primary role in Israel’s creation and Israel was born with the democratic ideals set down by the United States.

As Michael Oren explains in his book, [Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to Present](#), “America is deeply, substantively, and perhaps even existentially involved in the Middle East.” Oren details the deep roots of American engagement in the Middle East, explaining that the region was so important at the turn of the 19th century that Thomas Jefferson declared the Middle East to be his main overseas concern. Further, he explains that not only did presidents as far back as George Washington have a policy on the region, but early American conflicts in the Middle East played a critical role in shaping of the American Constitution. Moreover, the great icons of American literature and culture, including Washington Irving, Herman Melville and Mark Twain, all took fundamental inspiration from this seemingly strange and alien land.

Just as Abraham not only fathered Isaac, but also instilled him with values and ethics, America and Israel did not simply “give birth” to each other. They “taught” each other the shared ideals and principles that have continually guided both countries. ■

A Self-Destructive Culture

Hinei anochi holech lamut – “Behold I am going towards death” (Genesis 25:32)

Returning famished and exhausted from a hard day’s hunt, Esau begged his brother for a bowl of fresh lentil stew. Jacob agreed on condition that Esau sell him his birthright. Surprisingly, Esau accepted the deal, figuring to himself, “Behold, I am going towards death, so why do I need a birthright?” What does Esau mean? How does a man at the height of his strength and vitality consider himself so close to death? Kli Yakkar (on verse 32) explains that Jacob specifically cooked a meal of lentil soup, a traditional mourner’s meal, to remind Esau that as a hunter and warrior his avocation would eventually lead him to an untimely death. Ultimately, Esau saw no need to plan for some unseen future which he did not expect to live to see and thus he sold his birthright.

Esau's flippant mentality towards his own life was a clear indication of his preoccupation with death. The attitude that drove his critical decisions failed to account for his long-term needs and only fueled his ultimate downfall. Today, the Palestinian leadership in Gaza has cynically driven its people into this very same culture and mentality of death.

Recently, this way of thinking was evidenced as Hamas-sponsored terrorists violated the six-month calm which had existed in and around the Gaza Strip. This dangerous turn, the firing of nearly 100 rockets and mortars at the civilian cities of Ashkelon and Sderot, resulted in damage to property and the wounding of an eighty-year-old woman. Despite the half-year of calm along the Gaza border Hamas terrorists in the coastal strip have overseen a massive arms buildup and are again using the territory as a base for launching attacks at the Jewish state. These attacks continue despite the fact that they force Israel to close border crossings to Gaza, just as Egypt has done, which are necessary for the import of goods and materials. It is this mindset, shared by Esau, which has guided the Palestinian population towards further conflict and ongoing acts of violence, irrespective of the expected response and suffering.

The Hamas regime must abandon the short sighted mentality of death so prevalent throughout its culture. As long as the attitude of Esau guides them they will continue to pursue the violence and attacks so detrimental to the well-being and prosperity of the Palestinian people. Only when Hamas plans not for death, but for life, will it realize the need to reconcile itself to not only Israel's existence, but to the benefits and blessings of peaceful coexistence. ■

The Promise of Prosperity

Ra'oh ra'inu ki hayah Hashem imach – “We have surely seen that God was with you” (Genesis 26:28)

While the fields of Philistine were unsuccessful the fields of Isaac yielded fantastic crops, drawing anger and jealousy from the Philistines. (26:14) The situation deteriorated to the point where the shepherds of Avimelech deliberately destroyed the flowing wells dug by Isaac in the hopes of bringing him to financial ruin. Isaac finally abandoned the area and dug a new well so far from the Philistines that they could not claim ownership over the land. Yet, despite these tensions Avimelech traveled to Isaac to sue for peace, hoping to extend the treaty he had established with Abraham. Isaac couldn't understand why Avimelech, whose people drove him away, now wanted a peace treaty. “Why did you come to me,” he asked, “when you hated me and drove me from your midst?” (Verse 27) Avimelech explains: “We have surely seen that God was with you.” (Verse 28) Isaac's financial success is his greatest asset. Thus we see that because Isaac enjoyed financial prosperity Avimelech reconciled himself to Isaac being a powerful and influential player who could not be ignored.

To this day economic concerns remain one of the integral motivations in relations between peoples. The prospect of prosperity – or ruin – drives many of the decisions made across the world. Nations engage each other, sometimes despite hostilities, because they realize that the tangible benefits of peaceful relations far outweigh their differences.

It is this tool of financial incentive that Israel has been using to try and bolster the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Israel is committed to strengthening the Palestinian economy and in the last several months Israel has removed more than 130 checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank, allowing Palestinian businesses to reduce the time it takes to export products and allowing for more regular deliveries of supplies. During the first half of 2008 Israel boosted the number of permits for Palestinians to work inside Israel and the West Bank by 11% and daily wages increased 10% this year compared to 2006 and 2007. In fact, the Middle East Quartet, comprised of the United States, Russia, EU, and United Nations, issued a statement on Sept. 26 that “commended recent measures by the Israeli Government to lift restrictions on access and movement, and encouraged further steps to ease conditions for Palestinian civilian life and the economy.”

A powerful tool for regional peace will be the prosperity and financial growth of the Palestinian people. As the prosperity of ordinary Palestinians increases, so too does the likelihood that moderate Palestinians will follow in the footsteps of Avimelech, the king of the Philistines, and approach Israel for peace. ■