

NOVEMBER 10, 2008

Parashat Vayera

Inhospitable Hosts

Vayare vayaratz likratam – “And when he saw them, he ran to meet them.” (Genesis 18:2)

Hospitality – and the lack thereof – plays a major role throughout Parashat Vayera. When Abraham is visited by angels he exhibits the importance of hospitality by running to serve his strange guests. Abraham’s nephew Lot follows suit by welcoming the angels when they arrive in Sodom. Conversely, we see inhospitality from Lot’s wife. Rashi explains that during the angels’ visit Lot asked his wife to bring them some salt. Lot’s wife replied, “You too wish to bring this evil custom (of welcoming guests) to this place?” Ultimately it is because of her inhospitality that she was transformed into a pillar of salt. When Sodom was destroyed Lot’s wife looked back at the burning city and she was punished. Because she sinned with salt her penalty involved salt as well.

The importance of hospitality applies both to individuals as well as nations. When a nation welcomes guests from other countries into its territory it has a responsibility to protect the safety and well-being of those guests. Failure to do so indicates that the country spurns the compassion of Abraham’s hospitality.

Recently, citizens of Iran signified to the world their disdain and contempt for the welcoming practices of Abraham. On November 3rd thousands of Iranians, including young children, assembled to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the militant takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Crowds gathered outside the former U.S. Embassy building, where 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days, to celebrate the attack on the embassy in 1979. Under international law, diplomatic missions enjoy an extraterritorial status and thus, although remaining part of the host country’s territory, in almost all respects are treated as being part of the territory of the home country. The attack on the embassy and the 29 years of ensuing hostilities mark the nadir of Iranian inhospitality, animosity and tension.

Instead of seeing the hostage crisis of 1979 as a stain on the record of the Iranian people the Islamic Republic considers these events to be a source of pride worthy of celebration. Iran’s failure to provide sufficient security to ensure the safety of her visitors violated the principles of welcoming guests which Abraham held so dear. Yet, its celebration of the taking of those hostages clearly indicates how little Iran has progressed in moral and ethical clarity during the past 29 years. ■

Protecting the Innocent

Ha’af tispeh tzaddik im rasha – “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23)

When the Torah discloses God’s plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah Abraham immediately begins to negotiate on their behalf, hoping to save the cities and their inhabitants. Appealing to the divine sense of justice, Abraham wonders whether God would destroy the righteous people in a city together with the wicked. Commenting on Abraham’s question, Sforno (on verse 23) explains: Abraham tells God, “It is from the laws of the wicked to destroy together with the wicked the righteous living in their midst.” In essence, Abraham demands that God protect the guiltless no matter their proximity to the wicked.

Today, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has internalized this message of Abraham. While most armies primary objective is to accomplish their missions while suffering the fewest number of casualties, the IDF has consistently placed its own soldiers in greater danger to avoid harming noncombatants along with the terrorists in their midst.

This principle was once more displayed on November 4, when IDF and Israeli security forces uncovered a tunnel meant for the immediate abduction of IDF soldiers. This tunnel, which reached 250 meters into Israel from the security fence around the Gaza Strip, was designed to help carry out a soldier abduction like the one that led to the capture of Cpl. Gilad Shalit more than two years ago. The Israeli security forces successfully located the tunnel and carried out an operation to clear the passage. The IDF Spokesperson emphasized that this was a pinpoint operation intended to prevent an immediate threat. Instead of responding to this provocation with a large-scale aerial attack, clearly the safest route for the IDF, Israel instead initiated a response that would remove the threat but maintain calm in the area. As a result of this concern for the innocent Palestinians in the vicinity four IDF soldiers were wounded.

Israel has consistently shown restraint in its dealings with Hamas. By taking great pains to avoid Palestinian noncombatant injuries Israel displays her commitment to the legacy of Abraham, to not hurt the innocent along with the wicked. However, until Hamas renounces violence, further operations will continue to place Gaza's civilians in harm's way. ■

A Match Made In...

U'betuel yalad et rivkah... – “and Betuel begot Rebbecca” (Genesis 22:22)

Following the *akeida* the Torah returns to more mundane matters, relating some of the family news that reaches Abraham. Abraham learns of his nephews who were born into the family of his brother, Nachor. Strangely, while describing the male lineage the Torah also relates that, “Betuel begot Rebbecca.” (Genesis 22:22) Why does the Torah include a female in this list of male descendents? Sforno explains that following the *akeida* Abraham turned his thoughts to more commonplace matters such as finding a bride for his son Isaac. However, Abraham disapproved of the pagan way of life which seemed to preclude Isaac from marrying a Canaanite. For this reason the Torah brings the news of Rebecca's birth, explaining that there was at least one Canaanite woman worthy of Isaac. Rebecca would be the wife that would share and support Isaac's desire to continue the monotheistic heritage of Abraham. However, Abraham did remain concerned about the moral, ethical and religious qualities of his son's future wife.

Abraham realized that Isaac's wife must not only share his values, but complement his temperament as well in order to help him achieve his full potential in life. Of course every prospective husband is looking for these qualities in a wife, along with shared feelings of peace, harmony and love. However, recently we have seen a horde of weddings based not on these values, but rather a devotion to death, murder and destruction.

The New York Times recently reported on a mass marriage, the tenth such ceremony this year, which matched couples who share these ideas about death and murder. Describing an effort to match widows of Hamas terrorists with young Hamas troops, the article relates the attitude of Muhammad Yousef, a groom who equated marriage with jihad. “Mr. Yousef said he shared all the details of his past with his wife before they married, and she accepted his way of life wholeheartedly. The night before the mass wedding party, he said, his wife shared with him her ultimate wish: to carry out a joint suicide attack against Israel.” This sick perversion of marriage, from a relationship built on love and hope for the future to a bond rooted in a joint desire to murder and die, is the ultimate distortion Abraham's desire for his descendants.

Instead of sharing the values of life, love and hope, the marriages of Hamas unite couples dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Hamas' concepts of the values for a good marriage vary greatly from the ideas expressed by Abraham. Only when Hamas learns to stop preaching hate and violence, and instead seeks hope for a successful future, will they finally be capable of building a society able to achieve a real peace with Israel. ■