

DECEMBER 15, 2008

Parashat Vayeshev

Talking Tough

Velo yachlu dabro l'shalom – “and [they] could not speak peaceably unto him” (Genesis 37:4)

When Joseph's brothers saw his multicolored coat “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.” What does this strange phrase mean? Sforno explains that the brothers needed to work with Joseph in order to manage household matters and issues of business, and thus could not ignore Joseph altogether. Nonetheless, “they were not able to speak with him in peace...like the custom of brothers.” As a result, when Joseph's brothers needed to talk to him they were all business and skipped the pleasantries reserved for close friends and acquaintances.

Conducting affairs in a “strictly business” manner is an effective way of working with someone while showing disapproval of their actions. Nowadays, this very tactic of using tough dialogue to work towards positive results may soon take place with the incoming U.S. administration. While President-elect Obama has indicated that he is willing to talk directly with Iranian leaders he has already clarified that he will take a very firm approach in any diplomatic interactions with Iran.

Speaking to NBC's Meet the Press, U.S. President-elect Barack Obama recently said that the West must engage in “tough but direct diplomacy” with Iran. Elaborating further, Obama emphasized that Tehran's vocalized threats against Israel stand “contrary to everything” the United States believes in. “We need to ratchet up tough but direct diplomacy with Iran, making very clear to them that their development of nuclear weapons would be unacceptable, that their funding of terrorist organizations, their threats against Israel are contrary to everything we believe in,” Obama said. “We are willing to talk to them directly and give them a clear choice and ultimately let them make a determination in terms of whether they want to do this the hard way or the easy way.”

The United States must remain vigilant in her diplomatic efforts to stop the progress of the Iranian nuclear program. While previous diplomatic overtures have been used by the Islamic Republic as a stalling tactic, allowing them to advance their nuclear program, the U.S. must be careful to remember the model of Joseph's siblings and speak “not like the custom of brothers.” Rather, by using serious diplomacy the United States can convince Iran to cease its development of nuclear weapons. ■

Scolding Our Own

Vayig'ar bo aviv – “and his father rebuked him” (Genesis 37:10)

Joseph, excited by his dreams of the sun, moon and stars bowing to him, shared his visions with his family. Jacob reacted by rebuking his son telling him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and brothers indeed come to bow down to you...?” (Verse 10) In the next verse we learn that while the brothers grow ever more jealous of Joseph, “his father kept the saying in his mind.” (Verse 11) If Jacob accepted Joseph's dreams as truthful then why did he rebuke his son? Rashi explains that Jacob admonished Joseph, “Because he was placing hatred upon himself.” Jacob understood that Joseph's retelling of his dreams would only serve to arouse the anger of his brothers. Therefore Jacob reprimanded his son in an attempt to spare him his sibling's animosity.

Jacob, despite his great affection for Joseph, understood the need to take action against his son to maintain order within the family. Similarly, Israel recently took a tough stand, evicting a group of squatters living illegally in a building in Hebron, to maintain order within the country.

Enforcing a decision by the Israeli government, and supported by a Supreme Court ruling, Israeli troops removed some 250 unlawful tenants from a building in Hebron recently. The United Nations welcomed the Israeli move, which demonstrated the country's willingness to confront radical elements within Israeli society. Israel wants peace and has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to resolving the conflict with both the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors. Acting with swift resolution to enforce the Supreme Court ruling is one more example of Israel's commitment to a durable peace. Further, enforcing Supreme Court decisions, especially when difficult, underscores the uniqueness of the Israeli democracy in a region dominated by dictators.

Like Jacob rebuking Joseph, Israel defused a potentially explosive situation with the Palestinians in Hebron, thus making evident her willingness to take significant steps toward resolving the conflict. Now the Palestinian Authority must match Israel's commitment to peace by isolating Hamas, fighting terrorism and laying the groundwork for historic compromise. ■

The Strength of Joseph

Vechol asher hu oseh Hashem matzliach b'yado – “God made all he did prosper in his hand” (Genesis 39:3)

Throughout the *parashah* we see the development of Joseph. First, we meet Joseph as an immature adolescent preoccupied with his father's favor and his good looks. Then, Joseph is sold as a slave in a foreign land, accused of heinous crimes, and incarcerated indefinitely. Seemingly Joseph's spirit would be broken beyond recovery, yet the opposite takes place. Instead, Joseph overcomes amazing difficulties in his life, rises above his brothers in his own home, gains the favor of Potiphar as a slave, and even ascends to prominence in an Egyptian prison. Although he begins as an outsider both in the home of Potiphar and later in jail, Joseph consistently gains the favor of all who he encounters. Finally, Joseph develops to the point where the Egyptians not only accept him, but Pharaoh appoints him as the ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

While Joseph was often viewed as an outcast, his natural talents were so great that he eventually became a valuable ally for all who he encountered. Today, the nations of the world are discovering that what was true of Joseph is true of his descendants as well: that first impressions can be deceiving. Just as Joseph's contemporaries learned to overcome their initial contempt in favor of seeking out his help, today countries around the world are discovering the benefits of cooperation with Israel.

At the end of November a delegation of leading Kazakh businessmen, led by Kazakhstan's health minister, visited Israel for a business forum entitled, “Kazakhstan-Israel: Cooperation without Frontiers.” Kazakhstan's ambassador to Israel, Galym Orazbakov, expressed his hope that the forum would lead to wider Israeli investment in his home nation. The Kazakhs especially want more joint work in high tech, medical and defense technologies. Kazakhstan, once an area hostile to Israel as a member of the USSR, has maintained diplomatic relations with the Jewish State since 1992, the same year that Kazakhstan declared her independence. Today, the Kazakhs are clear in their ambition of collaboration with Israel in industry, agriculture, tourism and healthcare. According to Ambassador Orazbakov, “We'd like more Israeli investments in Kazakhstan. I do not rule out the possibility of discussing investment in Israel at the same time.”

While Israel was created as an outsider, scorned and rejected by most nations of the world, today many of those same nations seek out the Jewish State for advice, technical prowess and investment. Like Joseph, Israel has prevailed over many adversities and has not permitted the struggles which she faces to overwhelm her. Rather, overcoming these challenges has made Israel a stronger, more valuable ally to those who seek her cooperation. ■