

APRIL 27, 2009

## Parashat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim

### Learning Lessons from the Past

#### Achrei mot shnei benei Aharon – “Following the deaths of the two sons of Aaron” (Leviticus 16:1)

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The opening verses of Achrei Mot transition from the deaths of Aaron’s sons to the description of the Yom Kippur service performed in the Tabernacle. With no apparent connection between the deaths of Nadab and Abihu and the Yom Kippur service, why does the Torah link these concepts? Rashi (on verse 1) connects the ideas by noting the second verse where God tells Moses, “Speak to Aaron your brother, that he not enter the sanctuary at any time,” but that he may only enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. Nadab and Abihu were punished for precisely this error – because they brought their own offering without explicit instruction. Thus, the Torah connects these two seemingly unrelated ideas in order to teach Aaron to learn from the past, and to remind him to take care to learn from his children’s tragic error, “so that he does not perish in the manner that his sons died.”

Nowadays, the need to heed the lessons of history and avoid past mistakes has taken on a new urgency. On the eve of Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day the President of Iran once more denied Israel’s right to exist. As the Islamic Republic continues its pursuit of nuclear technology we must work to ensure that those who speak of wiping a nation off the map never again have the ability to do so.

At the recent Durban Review Conference, a follow-up to the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused Israel of being founded upon racism. During his speech, which opened the conference, Ahmadinejad repeatedly defamed Israel and even called the Jewish State a “cruel and repressive racist regime.” This hate speech is disturbing enough on its own, however, coupled with Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons this type of rhetoric is dangerous. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that while Israel remembered the six million Jews massacred during the Holocaust, “not everyone learned that lesson,” as the world invited “a racist Holocaust-denier who does not hide his intentions to wipe Israel off the face of the earth,” to be its guest of honor.

Rashi reminds us the world must bear in mind the painful lessons of the past, lest we make future mistakes. Today, the international community must remember this message and increase economic and political pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program. Failure to do so will undoubtedly bring catastrophe. ■

### The Rule of Law

#### Et mishpatai ta’asu – “My ordinances shall you do” (Leviticus 18:4)

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Normally, the word *mishpat* refers to areas of law and jurisprudence, yet a reference to legal statutes seems out of context in this verse. So what are the *mishpatim* to which the Torah is referring? The Midrash (Torat Kohanim 13:10) suggests that this is an admonishment which reminds us to adhere to the Torah’s commandments which follow logic (*mishpat* – justice), such as the prohibitions against stealing and murder. Ramban explains that these *mishpatim* do in fact refer to laws which govern justice, and that before introducing important ritual laws, the Torah makes a point to first remind us to adhere to the code of justice. “For this reason it is written, ‘And you shall live by them’

(verse 5), for the laws were given for the life of mankind for the settlement of nations and for the peace of man, so that one man should not harm his fellow man...”

Recently, as the world has witnessed several egregious miscarriages of justice, Ramban’s lesson reminds us that peaceful coexistence depends on our insistence that nations uphold the fundamental values of justice and law.

Fresh media reports have brought to light several injustices that appear to be common practice in regimes that support violence and terror. Iran “sentenced an Iranian-American journalist, Roxana Saberi, to eight years in prison after convicting her of spying for the United States,” the New York Times reported. Saberi, an American living in Iran, was originally held for buying a bottle of wine, but later charged with espionage for filing short news items without a permit. Additionally, Anderson Cooper reported on the incarceration and torture of Ahmad Batebi, whose photograph protesting against the Iranian government brought about his immediate arrest, torture and imprisonment. The Jerusalem Post has also reported that during Israel’s Operation Cast Lead, “ Hamas security forces or masked gunmen believed to be with Hamas extra-judicially executed 18 Palestinians... and beat and maimed dozens of political rivals, especially members and supporters of Fatah, according to Human Rights Watch.”

It is these same groups who deny justice to their own citizens that have exhibited a willingness to indiscriminately kill others as well. As Ramban teaches us that true peace depends on mankind upholding the values of justice and the rule of law, so too must these regimes learn to exhibit respect for their own people if they want to be taken seriously by the international community. ■

## Helping to Hear

### **Lo tekalel cheresh - “You shall not curse a deaf person” (Leviticus 19:14)**

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We can easily understand the continuation of the verse, “and do not place a stumbling block before a blind man,” but why is it prohibited to curse a deaf person? Tripping a blind person is cruel, as the blind person will surely stumble. But if the deaf person cannot hear the curse, what is the harm if one curses her? Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) explains in his Ha’amek Davar (on verse 14) that this verse cautions us regarding “maintaining peace and valuing peace between individuals.” The way that we treat others – even if they are not aware, says a great deal about our own nature and the values that motivate us.

In specifically highlighting the deaf the Torah emphasizes the extra sensitivity one needs to have towards the hard of hearing. In modern times, developing research from Israel is bringing exciting news to those afflicted with hearing loss.

A recent Israeli discovery on the function of tiny molecules, called microRNAs, in the inner ears of mice could lead to the cure of human deafness. If proven effective this technology could cure deafness in adults who have lost their sense of hearing due to aging, disease, drugs and noise; and to children suffering from genetic disease. World-renowned geneticist Professor Karen Avraham, of Tel Aviv University’s (TAU) Sackler School of Medicine, and Dr. Lilach Friedman published their research in the journal of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States. The TAU team – working with cooperation from the Weizmann Institute of Science molecular genetics department and biologists at Indiana’s Purdue University – discovered for the first time molecules vital to the development and survival of hair cells in the inner ear which are critical for normal hearing. This important discovery opens a new window for possible treatments and a cure for all types of deafness, whether age-related or genetic.

This important research underscores Netziv’s message about valuing and improving all human life. Perhaps one day soon Israeli research will make Netziv’s specific point irrelevant. Then we will not need to worry about “cursing the deaf,” because we will live in a world where every person enjoys the ability to hear. ■