

MAY 18, 2009

Parashat Bamidbar

Military Ethics

Saviv le'ohel moed yachanu – “Around the Tent of Meeting they shall camp” (Numbers 2:2)

Our *parashah* relates that as the nation prepared for its entrance into the Land of Israel, they were commanded to organize, take stock and form into camps. The Torah repeatedly uses various forms of the word *tzava* – which can mean “division” – but commonly refers to an army. The ordering and placement of the tribes clearly reflects a military orientation providing the best possible protection and defense of the camp. Rabbi Simcha Raz notes a powerful lesson in the layout of the camp: “The entire nation camps around the *mishkan*, its spiritual center. Certainly, an army without physical force, without arms, has no value. But these weapons, even with the most and best types are of little value if the personnel who wield them do not know what they fight for, and if they do not uphold spiritual values that are worth fighting and even dying for.”

Just as the ancient Israelite’s *tzava* drew strength from their moral compass, the Tabernacle, today the Israel Defense Forces draw strength from their moral and ethical guidelines. Rather than bring weakness, this ethical alacrity serves as a source of potency for Israel’s army.

In a recent report the United Nations accused the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) of firing intentionally at U.N. facilities in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead. Further, the Israeli newspaper Yediot Achronot reports that the U.N. has accused Israel of intentionally opening fire on civilians hiding in these buildings. While the U.N. levels these charges Israel has already issued its own report based on the conclusions of five investigative teams assigned to inspect events relating to the conduct of IDF soldiers during Operation Cast Lead. The inquiries demonstrated that throughout the fighting in Gaza the IDF maintained a high professional and moral level while facing an enemy that aimed to terrorize Israeli civilians and who were using Palestinian noncombatants as human shields. The report states that “The IDF dropped more than 2,250,000 leaflets during the fighting, used Palestinian radio, made personal telephone warnings to more than 165,000 Gaza residents and carried out a special warning shot procedure (“a knock on the roof”), in order to ensure that Palestinian civilians could avoid harm. In addition, during the operation the IDF authorized humanitarian convoys to enter the Gaza [Strip] and employed a humanitarian recess for several hours a day.”

While Israel’s commitment to moral conduct might complicate military maneuvers and compromise tactical advantages, ethics are never a sign of weakness. Rather, as the Tabernacle in the center of the Jewish camp reminds us, the Israeli commitment to honorable principles provides a source of strength for the Jewish State. ■

A Tulip in the Desert

Vayidaber Hashem el Moshe bemidbar sinai - “God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert” (Numbers 1:1)

Due to the focus on the census we call the fourth book of the Torah “Numbers” in English. However, in Hebrew we refer to the book as Bamidbar, “in the desert.” Why did the people receive the Torah specifically in the desert? The barren nature of the desert provided a perfect locale for the transmission of the Torah because the Israelites came to

understand their vulnerability, and thus developed their faith. Had the Torah been given in a more hospitable climate there would not have been a need for the miraculous *manna* to eat or drinking water from the well of Miriam. In the desert, devoid of any possibility of independent sustenance, the nation developed its powerful spiritual distinctiveness. The prophet Jeremiah (2:2) emphasized that the Jewish people demonstrated their faith specifically in the desert when he states that the Israelites “followed me into the desert into a barren land.”

Due to its lack of resources the desert served as the ideal locale for the giving of the Torah. Nowadays, the desert would not be the best choice, as an Israeli technological breakthrough is generating new assets in the wasteland.

Israeli company AORA is constructing the world’s first solar-thermal powered gas turbine station in the middle of the desert outside of Eilat, the website Israel21c reported. The plant, with its distinctive 100 foot tall tulip-shaped tower, is now nearing completion at Kibbutz Samar in Israel’s southern Arava region. According to the company’s website, “AORA has developed an advanced solar-hybrid power generation unit...based upon its long lasting relationship with the Weizmann Institute of Science. The system offers a unique modular solution to green power generation, comprising small Base Units (100kWe each) that can be strung together, building up into a large power plant, tailored to the customers’ needs. When the available sunlight is not sufficient (during cloud cover or at night), the system can operate on any alternative fuel source...thereby guaranteeing an uninterrupted power supply.” This green technology has recently received strong support from the Israeli government who has provided the company with a license to supply solar electricity to the national grid – the first such license to be granted by Israel to solar-thermal technology.

While ancient references to the desert portray a barren wasteland, future observers will view it differently as the desert becomes a source of power and energy for the State of Israel. ■

Purposeful Placement

Degel machaneh Yehudah – “The flag of the camp of Judah” (Numbers 2:3)

Why does the tribe of Judah lead the camp? What about Reuben, Simeon and Levi whose births preceded Judah? The ordering of the tribes emanated from Jacob’s blessings at the end of Genesis. Reuben disgraced his father, so he fell down on the list. Jacob also castigated Simeon and Levi for their acts of violence against the city of Shechem. (Genesis 49:5, 7) The Levites found solace in their religious service and never received a permanent portion in the land of Israel. The tribe of Simeon suffered its punishment by staking no claim to leadership, and instead was relegated to camping under the banner of Reuben. In punishing Simeon and Levi, Jacob clearly displayed his disapproval of the violence which they had instigated and demonstrably displayed his desire for peace.

By scattering Simeon and Levi among the tribes, Jacob endorsed the idea of peaceful coexistence. In modern times Jacob’s descendants adhere to this ideal, and continue to seek ways to avoid conflict and promote peace.

Reinforcing this notion, recently elected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated his desire to achieve a peace agreement with the Palestinian people. “We would like to extend peace first of all with our Palestinian neighbors,” Netanyahu said during a press conference with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, following a meeting between the two heads of state in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt. “We would like Israel and the Palestinians to live with prospects of peace, security and prosperity. The three things go together and not one at the expense of the other.” Netanyahu has pledged to work closely with President Barack Obama on efforts to peaceably stop Iran’s nuclear program as well as on Israeli-Arab peace efforts. By clearly stating his desire to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, Netanyahu has reinforced the principle which every Israeli Prime Minister has shared: that peace is a fundamental goal of the Jewish State.

Israel understands the message which Jacob conveyed in his denigration of Simeon and Levi. Recognizing that discord and tension are counterproductive, and that true peace will only come through negotiations with its neighbors, Israel continues to seek a durable peace. ■