

FEBRUARY 2, 2009

Parashat Beshalach

Defending One's Self

Ve'chamushim alu B'nei Yisrael - "And the children of Israel went up armed" (Exodus 13:18)

As the Jewish people fled from the Egyptians the Torah tells us *v'chamushim alu*. Rashi presents two separate explanations for the word *chamushim*. The first explanation is that they took armaments with them as they ventured into the desert, an interpretation based on the verse in Joshua (1:14) which states "you shall pass over in advance of your brothers *chamushim*, armed." Alternatively, Rashi suggests that the word *chamushim* emanates from the word *chamesh*, five, and refers to the well-known Midrash (Mechilta) that only 20% – one in five – of the Jews enslaved by the Egyptians actually left during the Exodus. The rest of the Jews perished "during the three days of darkness." (See Rashi on 13:18) These two explanations demonstrate that the Jewish people realized the need to defend themselves and yet saw the inefficacy of leaving their fate in the hands of other nations. Therefore, at the moment of the exodus they understood that they would have to be the defensive force that they required. Even before they worried about what they would eat in the desert they worked to ensure that they would be able to defend their families from attack.

Unfortunately, just as arms were needed for the ancient Israelites, they are also crucial for the modern State of Israel. Today, the United States continues to stand with Israel to ensure that she has the means to protect herself.

Last month Israel was forced to take action to defend herself. Many obfuscated Israel's right to defend her citizens, stating that Israel should be lambasted for using force, just as any other sovereign nation would do, to protect herself. However, the United States continued her long history of supporting her principal ally in the region. In fact, the Obama administration recently restated its full endorsement of continued American support of a strong Israel. The White House website states that "Barack Obama and Joe Biden strongly support the U.S.-Israel relationship, and believe that our first and incontrovertible commitment in the Middle East must be to the security of Israel, America's strongest ally in the region...and have consistently supported foreign assistance to Israel. They defend and support the annual foreign aid package to Israel and have advocated increased foreign aid budgets to ensure that these funding priorities are met." For more on U.S. aid to Israel click [here](#).

We cannot take this support for granted. We must continue the hard work necessary to help ensure that modern Israel, like the "armed" Children of Israel that left Egypt, has the resources to face the myriad threats in the region. ■

Modern-Day Tambourines

Vateitzenah kol hanashim acheareha batupim – "All the women followed with tambourines" (Exodus 15:20)

You are leaving Egypt forever and need to pack a bag. What do you bring? Food? Yes, but no time to let the dough rise. Clothing? Definitely. Blackberry? Do they have cell service in the desert? Leave it. Tambourine? Who needs a tambourine in the desert? Apparently, some felt that they might because all the women seemed to have them after the salvation of the Israelites at the Red Sea. The Torah tells us that during the majestic song of praise to God Miriam led all the women of Israel in dancing together with their tambourines. The Midrash asks the obvious question: when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt why did they decide to pack tambourines? Rashi (on verse 20) explains that "the

righteous women of that generation had faith that God would perform miracles.” So they brought their instruments for the celebration. They packed their belongings with such a powerful sense of optimism that they knew they would need music to celebrate along the way.

Music has always had the ability to bring out our emotions and the Jews used music in the desert to express their joy. Today, the power of music is bringing new expressions of solace, strength and comfort to the residents of Sderot.

In July 2007, documentary filmmaker Laura Bialis moved to Sderot “to find out what it means to live in a never-ending war, and to document the lives and music of musicians under fire.” She filmed what will become the movie *Sderot: Rock in the Red Zone*, documenting the strength that music brings to the children of the embattled western Negev community. The name of the movie is a play on the words voiced by the projectile warning system which calls out *tzeva adom*, or red alert, notifying residents that they have 15 seconds to find shelter. For more than seven years residents of Sderot have coped with the stress of attacks and as a result approximately 75% of children there suffer from some form of post traumatic stress disorder. “The kids I've met in the music scene are doing pretty well psychologically and I feel it's because they have a focus on creating,” Bialis said according to Israel21c.net.

Just as the music of Miriam provided the Israelite women with a way to express their intense feelings, today the musicians of Sederot have followed her lead and use their own music in a cathartic expression of creativity. ■

The Choice of Pharaoh

Ve'ikabdah b'Par'oh uvechol cheilo – “And I will triumph over Pharaoh and his entire army” (Exodus 14:4)

Moses initially approached Pharaoh in a diplomatic manner asking for freedom for the Children of Israel. Even after being rebuffed and having the Israelites workload increased Moses still returned and attempted a diplomatic solution. After repeated efforts Moses' diplomacy failed and finally ended completely when Pharaoh told Moses, “Get away from me, take heed to yourself, see my face no more; for on the day you see my face you shall die.” (10:28) Ultimately it was only with force that the Children of Israel gained their freedom, as the Torah states that God initiated the plague of the firstborns and then brought about the downfall of Egypt by crashing the sea down on its armed forces. However, if the Torah states that God is all-knowing then why does God repeatedly order Moses to seek a diplomatic solution that is doomed to fail?

Perhaps the Torah was using the example of Moses to teach us a valuable lesson for today. While at times it may seem that there is no way to persuade Iran to forgo its nuclear program, we must remember the Torah's example and exhaust every diplomatic possibility.

In President Obama's written policy on Iran he states that “he supports tough and direct diplomacy with Iran without preconditions.” The new administration has said that it favors normal diplomatic relations with Tehran, provided it shuns support for terrorism and abandons its nuclear program. “If Iran abandons its nuclear program and support for terrorism, we will offer incentives like membership in the World Trade Organization, economic investments, and a move toward normal diplomatic relations,” according to a White House document which revealed the Foreign Policy agenda of the Obama Administration. “If Iran continues its troubling behavior, we will step up our economic pressure and political isolation.” Further, the new U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Susan Rice, said that the U.S. would continue to press Iran to halt its nuclear work, adding that “dialogue and diplomacy must go hand-in-hand with a very firm message from the United States and the international community that Iran needs to meet its obligations as defined by the Security Council and its continued refusal to do so will only cause pressure to increase.”

Now is the time to focus diplomatic pressure on Iran in order to stop its illicit nuclear program, support for terrorism and threats toward Israel. Let us hope that unlike Pharaoh, Iranian leaders will see the wisdom of a diplomatic solution and accept the new administration's initiatives. ■