

MAY 4, 2009

Parashat Emor

Persistent Speech

Emor el hakohanim...ve'amarta aleihem – "Say to the Kohanim...and say to them" (Leviticus 21:1)

Why is Moses commanded twice in the very same verse to speak to the Kohanim? Ramban (on verse 1) explains that Moses is commanded to repeatedly speak to the Kohanim "so that he will command them and warn them many times, so that all of the sons of Aaron will be careful [about these laws] – even the minors." Thus, we come to understand the value of persistence. When one must deliver a critical message, he or she must be determined and utilize repeated communication in order for that message to sink in and become a core value for the recipient.

Ramban's lesson continues to hold value for us today, especially as we carry on with the critical work of pro-Israel advocacy. Like Moses' persistent teaching of the Kohanim, we must also be determined and constantly communicate with our elected officials in order to convey the depth of our support for Israel.

We are blessed to live in a democracy where every citizen has the opportunity to voice their concerns to their representatives. Yet, too many of us abdicate this right to effectively influence our government's policies. No matter which party or candidate one supports we must all make the effort to get involved politically. If we fail to communicate with our representatives we allow others to speak for us – or even against us. We all have the ability to send a letter, make a phone call, or send an email to our elected officials, and help them understand the issues that are important to us, their constituents. By consistently communicating the importance of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, our elected officials realize that our passion for Israel is truly an issue close to our hearts.

Ramban reminds us of the power and importance of consistent communication. Just as Moses repeatedly spoke to the Kohanim until his lessons became second nature to them, we too must continue to be persistent in communicating with our elected officials and help them understand the core value of strong American support for Israel. ■

Firmness on the Path to Peace

V'kidashto - "And you shall sanctify him" (Leviticus 21:8)

Why is a Kohen always called for the first *aliyah* of the Torah reading? In our *parashah* we read: "And you shall sanctify him (the Kohen)." According to Rashi, we sanctify the Kohen by giving him the opportunity to partake first in all matters: we ask the Kohen to lead the *birkat hamazon* and we honor the Kohen with the first *aliyah*. However, what if the Kohen wishes to give his honor to someone whom he feels deserves it more than himself? Although normally this would be permitted, the Mishnah (Gitten 5:8) insists that regarding the Torah reading the Kohen must read the first portion *mipnei darkei shalom* – because of the paths of peace. How does the Kohen accepting the first Torah reading bring peace? Our sages recognized that if the Kohen was able to defer this honor it would ultimately lead to conflict as each person would argue that he was the exception who deserved the accolade in place of the Kohen. By insisting that the Kohen accept the honor, and not allowing him to compromise, the rabbis ensured that peace would prevail.

The Mishnah's lesson, that by standing for our principles we can bring peace, continues to hold true in modern times. Nowadays, the United States has transformed this idea into action by proposing legislation to strengthen economic sanctions against Iran, a move which reinforces the Obama administration's "carrots and sticks" principle and has the potential to halt the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

As part of an effort to initiate meaningful negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, the Obama administration continues to make diplomatic overtures to Tehran. At the same time, "Congress is taking up a bipartisan proposal which would give the Obama administration more leverage over Iran by toughening economic sanctions on foreign oil and shipping firms that aid Tehran," the Associated Press reported. "We need to give them a choice: you can do business with Iran's \$250 billion economy or our \$13 trillion economy, but not both," said Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ), a lead sponsor of the bill along with Senators Evan Bayh (D-Indiana) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT). With Iran still having some difficulty perfecting its nuclear technology, and having left itself extremely vulnerable to diplomatic and economic pressure, the United States should use all diplomatic, political and economic tools—including direct engagement backed by the threat of tougher sanctions—to persuade Iran to forgo its pursuit of nuclear weapons. By increasing economic pressure on Iran, while pursuing diplomatic channels, the United States will conclusively demonstrate its resolve to quickly derail Iran's nuclear program.

The Mishnah teaches us that standing firm on a principle represents one of the *darkei shalom* – ways of peace. As America asserts its resolve to curtail Iran's nuclear progress, Iran must respond sensibly, stop its enrichment, and bring itself back to the path of *shalom*. ■

Marking the Passage of Time

U'sefartem lachem – "And you shall count for yourselves" (Leviticus 23:15)

Our *parashah* relates the requirement of *sefirat ha'omer*, the forty-nine day count from the second day of Passover until Shavuot. *Sefer Hachinuch* (commandment 273) explains that the count represents our great desire to connect the redemption of Passover to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Why then do we not count down starting at forty-nine, focusing on the number of days remaining, instead of counting up, beginning at one and increasing the count each day? The *Chinuch* answers, "Because this reveals within us the strong desire to arrive at the [appointed] time." The count highlights our anticipation. As the numbers rise, so too does our excitement, anxiety and focus on the goal.

The tally of the omer reminds us that counting days can build a sense of yearning. This year, as we continue to count the *omer*, we must also remember another count – the number of days that captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit has been in captivity. As the length of his detention increases, so too must we increase our vigilance for his safe return.

This week Gilad Shalit will spend his 1,050th day in captivity – nearly three years since his abduction on June 26, 2006. Although at one time Hamas seemed ready to reach a deal for Shalit's release, the terrorist organization has consistently reneged on agreements and made increasingly unrealistic demands which have derailed negotiations. With the new Israeli government still evaluating many of their positions, a source in Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's bureau recently stated that "everything related to the Shalit affair is under reconsideration and everything is open," according to a recent article in Ha'aretz. Gilad Shalit has never been allowed any visitors, nor has he been allowed to meet with representatives of the Red Cross, which is a violation of international law. Further, while Shalit's parents have received three letters from their son, they have not received any correspondence since June, 2008. As Netanyahu continues to develop his government's positions, let us all pray that the new Israeli administration will find a way to secure Gilad Shalit's freedom as soon as possible.

As we mark the passage of time through the counting of the *omer*, let us think as well of Gilad's count. *Sefer Hachinuch* reminds us that when we keep his plight at the forefront of our minds, our attention and efforts will help ensure that his parents can once again welcome their son home. ■