

MARCH 9, 2009

Parashat Ki Tisa

A Team Effort

He'ashir lo yarbeh v'hadal lo yamit - "The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not less" (Exodus 30:15)

The half-shekel contribution served as a means of counting the Jewish people, and thus the instruction that no one contribute more or less seems both obvious and superfluous. Were Moses to permit additional contributions he would have been unable to procure an accurate count of the people. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that it was even forbidden for a rich man to contribute on behalf of a specific number of poor people as a way to donate additional funds without ruining the census. However, if this practice resulted in an accurate census then why did it matter who paid? Hirsch answers that "The symbolic expression of the duty to work for the common wealth is the *machatzit hashekel*...the work of any single person will always remain a fragment. It requires an equally devoted sacrifice on the part of his brother to establish a whole." Thus, in communal work no one person can complete a task alone, but rather the entire community is required to achieve the goal.

The census was effective because each member of the community understood that they had a personal stake in completing the task. Today, the international community needs to demonstrate this same type of collective effort in order to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Recently, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen said that Iran has amassed enough uranium to fuel an atomic bomb. When asked if he thought Iran had enough fissile material for a bomb, Mullen stated "We think they do, quite frankly, and Iran having a nuclear weapon, I've believed for a long time, is a very, very bad outcome for the region and for the world." While the United States has stood at the forefront of international efforts to curtail Iran's nuclear progress, it needs the help of the international community to secure an effective diplomatic solution. The international community has stated its support for American engagement with Iran, but it is crucial that this process not be open-ended. Further, these efforts must be coupled with the threat of multilateral and unilateral economic and diplomatic penalties if Iran continues to use negotiations as a stalling tactic and defies Security Council demands by refusing to stop enrichment work.

The census was effective only when every single citizen contributed to the communal goal. Similarly, only when the international community bonds together will it accomplish the task of curbing Iran's nuclear weapons program. Simply put, one nation, no matter how determined, cannot do it alone. ■

Crystal Clear Communication

Vayare ha'am ki boshesh Moshe - "And the people saw that Moses was delayed" (Exodus 32:1)

In a span of only 24 hours the Jewish people tainted the experience of the exodus and turned to idolatry. 24 hours is how long Moses delayed in descending from Mount Sinai, giving the people enough time to construct the golden calf. Commenting on the word *boshesh*, "delayed," the Talmud (Shabbat 89a) describes how Moses left word that he would *ba shesh*—return from Mount Sinai at the sixth hour of the 40th day. Rashi (on verse 1) explains that "they [the Israelites] thought that the day [that Moses left] would count towards the final number, and he in fact told them [that

he would only return after] 40 full days.” While Moses surely did not know that the people had misunderstood his instructions, and the thought of the Israelites forging an idol in his absence must have seemed unimaginable, that is precisely what happened due to a simple miscommunication. Had Moses been clearer about the date of his return, leaving no room for misunderstanding, the entire episode may have been avoided.

The Talmud’s views on the events of the golden calf serve as an example of the importance of clear and precise communication. While Moses’ statement about his return was ambiguous, Palestinian Authority (P.A.) President Mahmoud Abbas’ recent declaration was crystal clear: Iran must cease its interference in Palestinian affairs.

P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas recently lashed out at Iran, demanding that the Islamic Republic stop meddling in internal Palestinian affairs, Agence France Presse reported. “We are sending a message to the Iranians and others—stop interfering in our affairs,” Abbas said following a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. “They are interfering only to deepen the rift between Palestinians.” Abbas’ comments came following a speech by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a two day summit in support of Hamas. Khamenei’s speech called for Muslims around the world to join the “resistance” against Israel, specifically stating that “Support...to Palestinians is a mandatory duty of all Muslims. I now tell all Muslim brothers and sisters to join forces and break the immunity of the Zionist criminals.” Iranian attempts to bolster the Islamist Hamas movement, which calls for the destruction of the State of Israel, are a direct challenge to the nationalist Fatah party, which supports a two-state solution.

While Moses’ failure to clearly state his timetable for returning from Mount Sinai ultimately led to the sin of the golden calf, Mahmoud Abbas should be commended for clearly declaring that Iran’s influence in Palestinian affairs is only meant to instigate further conflict in the region. ■

A Proper Boycott

V’im ayin, mecheini na misifrecha - “and if not, blot me please out of Your book” (Exodus 32:32)

The Torah relates that following the sin of the golden calf God told Moses “Now therefore let Me alone...that I may consume them; and I will make of you a great nation.” (32:10) In essence, a divine plan had been constructed to destroy the Jewish people and replace them with Moses’ descendants. However, Moses wanted no part of the plan and found himself in the challenging position of having to convince God to pardon the Jewish people for constructing the calf. What did Moses say to secure forgiveness for the people? He threatened a boycott, stating “Yet now, if You will forgive their sin; and if not, blot me please out of Your book which You have written.” Moses refused to serve as even a passive participant in the plan to destroy the Israelites. His tactic worked and the nation was forgiven.

Moses’ threatened boycott teaches that sometimes the most effective way to show disapproval is by refusing to participate in the objectionable behavior. Today, the United States is using this tactic to protest efforts that support anti-Semitism and condemn Israel.

The Obama administration has said that it will boycott a major U.N. conference on racism due to an agenda which unfairly singles out Israel for censure and could restrict freedom of speech, The Washington Post reported. The international anti-racism conference in Geneva, commonly referred to as “Durban II,” has again proven to actually be a celebration of racism and anti-Semitic activity, much like the first international anti-racism conference which took place in Durban in 2001. President Obama’s decision not to send U.S. representation to the event underscores the United States’ unstinting commitment to combating intolerance and racism in all settings. Recognizing that this conference is set to ignore global racism and focus on lambasting Israel, Canada and Italy have also decided not to attend. In addition, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Denmark have all stated concern that Muslim states will use the conference as an attack platform.

As Moses taught us, when facing the prospect an unacceptable proposal, sometimes the best course of action is simply to walk away. ■