

JUNE 22, 2009

Parashat Korach

Denying the Truth

Eretz zavat chalav u'devash – “A land flowing with milk and honey” (Numbers 16:13)

Throughout the Torah the Promised Land is consistently referred to as a land “flowing with milk and honey.” This description first appears during the episode of the burning bush (Exodus 3:8) and is repeated numerous times including in Exodus 13:5, 33:3 and Leviticus 20:24. Datan and Abiram also used this phrase to describe a land, but as opposed to referring to the Land of Israel, they instead were speaking about Egypt, the land of Jewish enslavement. Datan and Abiram asked Moses, “Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness?” (16:13) By referring to Egypt with the identical phrase that Moses had used to refer to Israel, Datan and Abiram insulted and denigrated Moses’ leadership. Even worse, they also denied the very premise upon which the Israelites’ national hopes and dreams had rested.

In referring to Egypt as the land of milk and honey, Datan and Abiram attempted to distort the historical record in order to weaken Moses and bolster their own control. Similarly today, some of Israel’s opponents are attempting to distort the historical truth of the Land of Israel in an effort to deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

A new narrative has developed which claims that the State of Israel was created by Europeans to atone for the sins of the Holocaust. Without a doubt, the Holocaust convinced much of the world of the urgent need to establish a Jewish state. However, the urgency of Israel’s establishment and the timing of its creation must not be confused with the Jewish people’s deep historical roots in the Land of Israel. Unfortunately, such confusion has been manipulated by detractors of Israel to create a false narrative which alleges that the need and desire for a Jewish state in Israel stems directly from the ashes of the Holocaust. Such a false statement not only disregards thousands of years of Jewish heritage, but also gives credence to critics of the modern State of Israel who claim that the Jewish people have no historical rights to the Land.

By adopting the notion that there is no Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel, and that the State of Israel exists solely because of the Holocaust, Israel’s detractors can freely assert that the Palestinians are being forced to pay for the crimes of the Europeans. This is exactly what Yasser Arafat did at Camp David when he denied that the Temple ever existed in Jerusalem. As a Jerusalem Post editorial on Sep 8, 2000 explained, “Without recognizing Israel’s ancient connection to Jerusalem, the Palestinians can cling to the notion that Israel exists only by might, not by right.”

Just as Datan and Abiram denied Moses’ claims about the Promised Land, opponents of Israel have similarly denied our irrefutable historic right to that very same land. Like Moses, who forcefully refuted the venom of Datan and Abiram, we must also vehemently refute this dangerous falsehood. We must expound the historical roots of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, and unequivocally proclaim our eternal Jewish connection to the Land. ■

Stopping a Plague

Vaya’amod bein hameitim ubein hachayim – “and he stood between the living and the dead” (Numbers 17:13)

After yet another round of complaints, the Jewish people found themselves suffering from a devastating plague. Moses hurried Aaron into action, instructing him to offer incense to atone for the nation and to stop the affliction.

Aaron followed his brother's orders and saved thousands of lives. How did Moses know that Aaron should offer incense? Rashi (on verse 13) explains, "The Children of Israel slandered and mocked the incense calling it the elixir of death; through it Nadab and Abihu died and the two hundred and fifty men were burned. Said God, you shall see that it has the power to stop [even] a plague..."

The incense used during the plague had a miraculous healing power that saved thousands of lives. While we no longer have access to the incense which Aaron used to stop the plague in the camp, an Israeli researcher has identified a potential new weapon to battle the modern-day plague of cancer.

Using a plant which was first described for its medicinal value centuries ago, an Israeli doctor hopes to produce an entirely new antioxidant molecule which can stop the spread of cancer, according to the website Israel21c.org. Dr. Fuad Fares of the Carmel Medical Center at the University of Haifa has discovered what he believes is a new family of antioxidants which has shown excellent results in stopping prostate and colon cancer. Dr. Fares hopes that the plant could be ingested as a food additive, or like a vitamin. In clinical testing, mice with cancer were given extracts of the plant as a medicine. As Dr. Fares recounts, "When we looked at the cells inside the tumors we saw these compounds induced cell death and decreased the tumors by 70 to 80% compared to the control group."

By combining ancient wisdom with modern technology Dr. Fares hopes to replicate the healing power of the incense which Aaron used in the camp. Like Aaron, if he is successful he will help end the spread of a plague and save countless lives. ■

A Dangerous Dispute

Vayikach Korach - "And Korach took" (Numbers 16:1)

The Mishnah (Avot 5:20) contrasts "arguments for the sake of heaven," which have constructive outcomes, with "arguments not for the sake of heaven," that "do not have a constructive outcome. What is an example of an argument for the sake of heaven? This is the debate of Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and his entire company." These two examples seem inconsistent – Hillel and Shammai debated each-other, but Korach challenged Moses, not "his entire company." Why then does the Mishnah imply that Korach had a non-constructive argument with his own men? While Korach and his men agreed to oust Moses, they disagreed sharply over who should replace him. Thus, Korach and his men took the most critical issue, overthrowing Moses, for granted and instead fought only over who should be the next leader – ensuring that their arguments were destructive and "not for the sake of heaven."

Korach and his followers clashed over who should replace Moses while failing to debate the larger issue of Moses' legitimacy. Just as Korach and his men took their belligerent policy for granted and only debated who should lead it, nowadays, Iranians are taking to the streets to influence the next leader to champion their illicit nuclear program.

The recent upheaval throughout Iran has been focused on the lack of transparency in the Iranian elections. However, no matter who emerges victorious, Iran is unlikely to change any of its policies relating to peace in the region. In fact, President Barack Obama recently downplayed differences between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his electoral opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi, saying both were hostile towards the United States. "I think it's important to understand that although there is amazing ferment taking place in Iran, the difference between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised," Obama said. "Either way we were going to be dealing with an Iranian that has historically been hostile to the United States, that has caused some problems in the neighborhood and has been pursuing nuclear weapons."

Whichever side emerges victorious in the struggle for control of Iran, the world will still need to confront Iran's nuclear program. Like Korach and his men who fought amongst themselves but shared hostile values, we must remember that both factions in the Iranian dispute share the desire for an Islamic Republic with nuclear weapons. ■