



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 10, 2009

Parashat Re'eh

Choosing Blessings or Curses

Brachah u'klalah – “A blessing and a curse” (Deuteronomy 11:26)

Moses laid out the Israelites' choice, to follow the commandments of the Torah or to ignore them, in stark terms. “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse.” S'forno (on verse 26) explains that they refer to two opposite extremes. A blessing alludes to a success greater than that which is needed to simply survive. Therefore, blessings imply affluence and prosperity. Conversely, a curse refers to a shortage, “when the cursed does not attain an amount sufficient to meet his needs.” Moses tells the people that while following the precepts of the Torah would bring them abundant rewards, abandoning those principles would produce negative consequences. The Jewish people were forced to make a decision and accept the result of that choice.

Like the Israelites who faced the options that Moses placed before them, the government of Iran also has a decision to make. They can either benefit from engagement with the international community or they can continue their nuclear weapons program and face the consequences.

In June 2008 the International Working Group on Iran's Nuclear Program outlined a list of benefits that the international community was willing to extend to Iran in exchange for the halting of its nuclear weapons program. These benefits include the provision of technological and financial assistance necessary for Iran's peaceful use of nuclear energy, technical cooperation projects in Iran by the IAEA, support for construction, and research and development in nuclear energy. The group also offered to take steps towards the normalization of trade and economic relations, such as improving Iran's access to the international economy, markets and capital; and to create the framework for increased direct investment in, and trade with, Iran.

At the same time, the United States is prepared to impose harsh economic sanctions should Iran refuse to halt its nuclear weapons program. U.S. officials have reportedly discussed with European allies the option of sanctioning companies that supply Iran with 40 percent of its gasoline and other refined petroleum products. The Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act would give the President authority to impose such sanctions, which would further hamper Iran's already suffering economy. For more on the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, click [here](#).

Like the choice that Moses outlined to the Jewish people, Iran must make a choice as to whether it will accept the blessing of international acceptance or suffer the curse of increased sanctions. In order to receive the blessing and avoid the curse, Iran must abandon its nuclear weapons program. ■

A Nation of Compassion

Lo tevashel gedi bachalev imo – “You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk” (Deuteronomy 14:21)

This verse, which outlines the requirement to separate milk from meat, serves as one of the primary sources for the laws of *kashrut*. What value underscores this precept? Ramban (on verse 21) connects the prohibition with the words that precede it, “for you are a holy people unto the Lord your God.” He explains that the combination of milk and meat are not inherently repulsive. Rather, the Torah prohibits cooking milk with meat, “for us to be holy, so that we

would not be a stubborn nation without compassion, to remove milk from the mother with which we will cook the child.” According to Ramban, we separate milk from meat to remind us to aspire to holiness and exhibit compassion, even to the animals that we eat.

Ramban’s message of compassion is a core component of Israel’s national ethic. This compassion is embodied in Israel’s policy towards Gaza, where despite Hamas’ ongoing aggression and hateful rhetoric, Israel continues to provide humanitarian support for the citizens of Gaza.

While Hamas continues to call for Israel’s destruction, fires rockets into Israeli cities and holds IDF soldier Gilad Schalit in violation of international law, Israel demonstrates its compassion for the people of Gaza by facilitating the shipment of goods and materials to address their daily needs. During one week in July, Israel transferred 417 truckloads (9,342 tons) of humanitarian aid, more than two million liters of heavy-duty diesel for the Gaza power station, and 1,075 tons of gas for domestic use. Since the end of Operation Cast Lead, 417,356 tons of aid and over 57 million liters of fuel have been delivered to the Gaza Strip. Additionally, a special shipment of 17 trucks containing equipment needed for the operation of Gaza’s power station, as well as materials and equipment needed for constructing a sewage purification facility in the northern Gaza Strip have been allowed in to the coastal strip. Despite the risks to Israel posed by Hamas, Israel continues to provide supplies to the population of Gaza in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis.

While the leadership of Hamas stubbornly promotes an ideology of violence, Israel maintains its ethic of compassion towards the citizens that elected Hamas. The hatred of Hamas has not prevented Israel from its aspiration to be a “holy people,” and to exhibit compassion towards the very people actively working for its destruction. ■

True Tzedakah

Ki fatoach tiftach et yadcha lo - “You shall surely open your hand to him” (Deuteronomy 15:8)

Based on this section of the Torah Rambam (Book of Commandments, positive commandment 195) writes that “it is a positive commandment to give *tzedakah*.” As the verse states, *tzedakah* is not just a mere donation, but rather *tzedakah* means fulfilling any and all needs that others may lack. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 449) explains that the commandment to give *tzedakah* requires us to give not only to the poor, but also to those who can support themselves. “For sometimes due to illness or a different cause [one will have a need] that will not be found in another place. [Fulfilling this need] also without a doubt falls into the category of the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*.”

While Israel enjoys a strong economy, it cannot possibly sustain the level of defense spending which is necessary to protect its citizen’s from the many threats to their security. By supplying Israel with vital aid for defense, the United States executes Rambam’s definition of *tzedakah* in the fullest sense.

The House of Representatives recently passed the annual foreign aid bill which will provide Israel with \$2.22 billion in critical security assistance. When combined with the \$555 million in assistance included in a recently passed emergency supplemental bill, the foreign aid bill – passed by a vote of 318-106 – will fully fund the administration’s request of \$2.775 billion in security aid for Israel. This amount fulfills the second year of the 10-year, \$30 billion U.S.-Israeli Memorandum of Understanding. The Senate Appropriations Committee has already approved its version of the bill, which is expected to go to the Senate floor for final passage in the coming weeks. As the Senate considers the foreign aid bill, it must be sure to support the bill in full and pass the legislation without any cuts in funding. For more on U.S. aid to Israel, click [here](#).

Through foreign aid to Israel, America provides the Jewish State with the funds necessary to face daily rocket attacks from Gaza, a rearmed Hizballah and potential threats from hostile countries. Truly, there is no better form of *tzedakah* than that. ■