

MAY 25, 2009

## Shavuot

### Walking Together

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#### El asher telchi eilech – “Where you go, I will go” (Ruth 1:16)

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Confronted with Naomi’s plans to return to her homeland, Ruth declared her desire to join her mother-in-law. In her often quoted statement, Ruth told Naomi “Where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God.” Why does Ruth not simply say “your God is my God,” why does she add the other portion? According to the Talmud (Yevamot 47a) Ruth’s words actually corresponded to Naomi’s instructions about Jewish life. Ruth’s statements, while they seem superfluous, in fact explain the reason for her desire to join Naomi and the Jewish people – not simply to remain with her mother-in-law out of a sense of obligation, but instead because of her deep sense of identification with the values and principles that guided Naomi’s life.

Ruth’s bond to Naomi emanated from her admiration for the principles by which Naomi lived. Today, shared principles continue to be a lynch-pin of many relationships, particularly the special friendship between the United States and Israel.

Following his recent meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Barack Obama highlighted the underlying ideals that form the basis of the special relationship between the two nations. Obama, commenting on what he called an “extraordinarily productive series of conversations,” stated that “Obviously this reflects the extraordinary relationship, the special relationship between the United States and Israel. It is a stalwart ally of the United States. We have historical ties, emotional ties. As the only true democracy of the Middle East it is a source of admiration and inspiration for the American people.” Echoing Obama’s comments, Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “We share the same goals and we face the same threats. The common goal is peace. Everybody in Israel, as in the United States, wants peace. The common threat we face are terrorist regimes and organizations that seek to undermine the peace and endanger both our peoples.” For more on the Obama-Netanyahu meeting, click [here](#).

A commitment to democracy, the rule of law, freedom and human rights are some of the common principles that bind Israel and the United States together. These shared values have brought cooperation, admiration and bonding between the two nations, and ensures that the two countries will, like Ruth and Naomi, “walk together.” (Ruth 1:19) ■

### Actions, More than Words

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#### Kol asher diber Hashem na’aseh – “All that God has said we will do” (Exodus 19:8)

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This dedication to following the commandments was more famously articulated later when the Israelites, presented with the Torah, responded by saying *na’aseh v’nishmah* – “We will do, and we will listen.” (Exodus 24:7) Interestingly, the Jewish people responded by saying *na’aseh* before they said *v’nishmah*. The Talmud (Shabbat 88a) notes that the word *na’aseh* comes first because the people committed to keeping the Torah even before hearing the details, and in that moment “Six hundred thousand angels approached each member of Israel and tied on him two crowns: one for ‘we will do’ and another for ‘we will hear.’” Thus, the Israelites expressed the notion that when making a commitment, actions are more important than words.

The ancient Israelites understood that words have little value if they are not supported by actions. Nowadays, as the United States embarks upon a diplomatic process with Iran, the need for immediate action to express good faith is especially critical.

The United States recently initiated diplomatic contact with Iran in hopes of convincing the Islamic Republic to abandon its nuclear weapons program. However, many analysts fear that Iran will use the negotiations as a stalling tactic, allowing the Iranians to continue their pursuit of nuclear weapons while deflecting the threat of increased economic sanctions. Thankfully, President Obama has clearly articulated that talks with Iran cannot be open-ended, and will not be a cover which allows Iran to develop nuclear weapons. According to the president, “We’re not going to create a situation in which the talks become an excuse for inaction while Iran proceeds with developing a nuclear- and deploying a nuclear weapon.” Further, the Washington Post reported that “U.S. and European officials have privately said that if Iran fails to begin serious talks by September or October – the period when the U.N. General Assembly meets – the administration and its allies will shift direction and seek to impose tough sanctions on Iran.” For more information on Iran, please visit [www.aipac.org/IRAN](http://www.aipac.org/IRAN)

Iran has a decision to make. The Islamic Republic can say *nishmah*, we will hear, and meanwhile continue its nuclear program, ultimately leading to serious economic harm for its people through even tougher sanctions. Or, Iran can say *na’aseh*, take concrete steps to curtail its nuclear program, and take advantage of the diplomacy that the administration has already begun. ■

## Amber Waves of Thanks

### U’beyom habikurim - “Also in the day of the first-fruits” (Numbers 28:26)

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Many commentators assume that the Torah’s reference to Shavuot as *Yom Habikurim* alludes to the first fruit offerings (*bikkurim*) which the Jewish people brought to the Temple. However, Rashi explains that the term *bikkurim* refers not to new fruit, but rather to the “new offering.” (28:26) Rashi refers to this sacrifice, known as the “two bread” offering, as “the first of the wheat offerings to come from the new wheat crop.” (See Rashi on Numbers 28:26) Even today, anyone traveling through Israel around Shavuot time can easily understand the timely connection between the holiday and wheat. It is at this time that the rainy season has ended and the wheat in the fields has slowly dried, turning its amber hue and readying itself for harvest. As wheat forms the staple of all human sustenance it is only logical that the annual wheat offerings at Shavuot provided the Israelites an opportunity to express thanks for a successful crop, and thus for their ongoing nourishment.

Our focus on wheat throughout Shavuot reminds us of the significance that grain still plays in sustaining the world’s population. As such, Shavuot is the ideal holiday to celebrate Israeli advances in combating a disease in wheat plants.

The website Israel21c.org recently reported on an Israeli effort to use genetic engineering to fight stripe rust, a form of fungus that attacks healthy grain crops, and wreaks \$150 million in damage per year in the U.S. alone. In developing countries where wheat is a central staple, the consequences to populations can be much more severe. In collaboration with a team of researchers at the University of California-Davis, Professor Tzion Fahima of Haifa University is researching the genetic characteristics of Israeli wild wheat, with an aim to improving cultivated wheat through biotechnology. Wild wheat, which was discovered in Israel 100 years ago, is believed to be the original wheat plant, before wheat became domesticated. Having discovered a gene in wild wheat that provides resistance to stripe rust, the researchers hope to transfer that gene to cultivated wheat and help minimize the effects of stripe rust on the world’s wheat crops.

Through technological advances Israel is working to ensure that the world’s wheat crops grow to their full potential. As we celebrate Shavuot and give thanks for the blessings of our new crop, we do so knowing that the people of Israel are also helping to bring nourishment and sustenance to the entire world as well. ■

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