

APRIL 13, 2009

Parashat Shemini

Objects of Life and Death

Va'teitzei aish – “And there came forth fire” (Leviticus 9:24 and 10:2)

The Torah describes the appearance of divine fire twice in our *parashah*. The first fire consumed the sacrifices of the people, symbolizing the consecration of the Tabernacle and the nation's final atonement for the sin of the golden calf. The second fire was very different and consumed Aaron's sons after they had offered an unwarranted sacrifice. A Beraita (Masechet Middot) describes the first fire as one of “the miracles that God performed for [the people],” while the Midrash calls the fire that killed Nadab and Abihu the literal manifestation of “the angel of death.” Why does the Torah use the exact same language to refer to these two opposing concepts? The two fires, one constructive and the other destructive, teach us a lesson about the inherent duality of objects. The fire which the Torah describes was not in itself either constructive or destructive, but rather it was the function of the fire which determined its connotation.

There is no better modern example of this concept than the development of missiles in today's Middle East. While Iran continues to develop missiles with longer ranges which put more people in range, Israel and the United States are working together to utilize missiles as a positive tool to protect their citizens.

This past summer, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched a series of long- and medium-range missiles capable of striking Israel and American forces across the Middle East. The most advanced weapon tested, the Shihab-3, can reach as far as southern and eastern Europe. Furthermore, concerns continue to mount over Iran's work on an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching American shores. U.S. intelligence assesses this development to be a possibility sometime within the next decade. To meet these challenges the Israel Air Force (IAF) recently conducted its 17th test of the newly upgraded Arrow 2 missile defense system, according to a recent Jerusalem Post report. The Arrow 2 is capable of intercepting Iranian missiles and is operated in conjunction with a new and more advanced model of the American Green Pine radar system, which was deployed in the Negev Desert in late 2008. The test was conducted jointly by the IAF and the U.S. Missile Defense Agency. For more on U.S.-Israel strategic defense cooperation, click [here](#).

The fire mentioned in our *parashah* demonstrates that certain objects can be used for both constructive and destructive purposes. Today, the United States and Israel are proving this concept by using the very same object to protect innocent civilians that Iran would use to destroy the lives of millions. ■

Good Intentions

Vayikchu Nadav va'Avihu...ish machtato - “And Nadab and Abihu...each took his censer” (Leviticus 10:1)

While we know that Nadab and Abihu were punished for offering sacrifices not commanded of them, the Torah never specifies the exact nature of their sin. Some commentators, such as Rashi who explains that they offered the sacrifices while inebriated, find faulty behavior underlying their actions. Yet others see an overwhelming desire to come closer to God as the motivation for their actions. Little did Nadab and Abihu realize that perhaps more than any other factor, their fervor to “do the right thing” led them to engage in terribly dangerous deeds that brought about their

deaths. Thus, while their intentions may have been pure, they ultimately died because they failed to fully evaluate the consequences of choosing to worship in an improper manner.

Unlike Nadab and Abihu we must be cognizant of the consequences of our actions, lest our good intentions end in tragedy. The United States must bear this lesson in mind as it offers assistance the Palestinian people.

At the recent Palestinian donor's conference in Egypt, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a pledge of \$900 million in aid to the Palestinian people. The administration's aid proposal calls for \$300 million for humanitarian assistance to Gaza and \$600 million for economic and security assistance to the West Bank. It is critical that the U.S. maintains sufficient Congressional oversight of these funds to guarantee that this aid does not fall into the hands of those who call for Israel's destruction. As such, the aid to Gaza is being distributed through international organizations rather than Hamas, who continues to extol violence and refuses to recognize the State of Israel or abide by previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. In the past, Hamas has used building materials such as pipes, cement and metals to build rockets and strengthen its terror infrastructure. By utilizing international organizations to distribute aid to Gaza, the United States hopes to guarantee transparent use of this aid and maintain the isolation of Hamas. For more on Hamas, click [here](#).

While America's desire to help the Palestinians is laudable, we must remember the lesson of Nadab and Abihu. The motivation to "do the right thing" is not enough. We must combine that desire with foresight and care to make sure that good intentions lead to a positive outcome. ■

The Wine of Israel

Yayin v'sheichar al teisht – "Drink no wine nor strong drink" (Leviticus 10:9)

Following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu their father Aaron is warned to abstain from alcohol in his role as High Priest. Rabbi Naftali of Rupshitz notes that in the punctuation of the verse we find a separation between the words "do not drink" and "you," teaching us that while Aaron was not permitted to drink due to his service in the Tabernacle, at other times wine can and should bring benefit and joy to life. He lists the events where wine drinking is encouraged directly from the wording of the verses. (10:9-10) "Your sons with you" refers to the joy of a wedding; "When you enter the tent of meeting" refers to a dedication ceremony; "That you die not" references a feast of thanksgiving and "That you may separate between the holy and the common" is a reference to the wine of Kiddush and Havdalah. While wine had no place in a priest's religious service, our rabbis remind us that wine always played a central role in the religious and cultural life of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people's connection to wine has been consistent throughout the ages. Today, this connection has sparked a resurgence in Israel's modern wine industry, which now boasts several world-class wineries.

Capitalizing on the centrality of wine in Jewish life, an American entrepreneur is bringing some of Israel's finest wines to America. "Wine was born in Israel, and on the eastern Mediterranean as a whole," Richard Shaffer told the website Israel21c. "In Israel, Cyprus, and Turkey, you can find stone wine presses that are 5,000 years old. It's a land that has been 'winning' for thousands of years." Shaffer founded Israel Wine Direct to import wines from family-owned, boutique wineries that produce some of Israel's finest quality wines. Further, Shaffer believes that because wine is so reflective of the place in which it is made, Israeli wine can give Americans an insight into Israel beyond what they see on the news. "Wine has an amazing way of bringing people together – what it does is connect people to a sense of place," explains Shaffer. "Israeli wine is a vehicle for understanding the real Israel." According to Shaffer, the idea is to look beyond the wine itself and focus on its meaning for Israel as a whole. "Just as Israel's language is reborn after 2000 years, the wine is too," says Shaffer. "Israeli wine is now something that people can be proud of."

In sharing the best of Israel's wines with the world, Richard Shaffer connects people to the ancient culture of the Jewish people, who have always combined wine with religious celebration. He also introduces them to the sophistication of the modern State of Israel, which produces wines that are among the finest in the world. ■

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