

AUGUST 17, 2009

Parashat Shoftim

Essential Leadership

Som tasim alecha melech – “You shall surely place upon yourself a king” (Deuteronomy 17:15)

The Torah seemingly commands the Jewish nation to appoint a king who will lead them. However, the impetus for appointing a king seems to emanate not from an inherent need, but rather from a desire to follow other nations. “And you shall say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations that surround me” (verse 14). Were the people instructed to appoint a king or does the Torah simply state their desire? According to Rabbi Yossi (see Talmud Sanhedrin 20b) the instruction to appoint a king represents a full-fledged commandment incumbent upon the people when they entered the Land. If so, why would the people request a king “like all the other nations?” Rabbi Simcha Raz (Shivim Panim L’Torah, Devarim p. 136) suggests that the people would refer to surrounding nations whose rulers would amass their armies against the Jewish people. For this reason they would be forced to say, “Since the nations that surround us have rulers who plot evil against us, we must also place over us a ruler who will lead us...in defense.”

The Israelites needed a king because the surrounding nations plotted against them. While much has changed over the years, the State of Israel must still contend with hostile neighbors who are bent on the destruction of the Jewish State.

Under the noses of United Nations (U.N.) observers, the Iranian-backed terrorist army Hizballah has stockpiled more than 40,000 rockets in southern Lebanon and is training its fighters to use sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles and long-range missiles capable of striking as far south as Tel Aviv, The Times (UK) reported. According to Western intelligence sources, Hizballah fighters have received training in Syria on the SA8 anti-aircraft system, capable of striking helicopters and low-flying jets. Hizballah has rebuffed U.N. Security Council demands to disarm and, with the help of Tehran and Damascus, has dramatically expanded its arsenal.

Hizballah has also begun negotiations to officially enter the Lebanese government. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that Israel will hold Lebanon responsible for any future Hizballah attack should the terrorist group be brought into Beirut’s incoming government, the New York Times reported. “If Hizballah joins the Lebanese government as an official entity, let it be clear that the Lebanese government, as far as we are concerned, is responsible for any attack – any attack – from its area on the State of Israel,” Netanyahu told reporters. For more on Hizballah, click [here](#).

The U.N. must step up its inspections and crack down on arms violations by Hizballah. While the Israelite king was appointed to protect his people from foreign attack, modern institutions must insure that Israel’s government does not feel the same threats that caused the Jewish people to appoint a king so many years ago. ■

The Ethic of Peace

V’karata eileha l’shalom - “you shall call out to it in peace” (Deuteronomy 20:10)

Commenting on this verse, the rabbis in the Midrash (Devarim Rabbah chapter 5) noted the importance of peace. “See how great is the power of peace! Even before war, which a person enters only with swords and spears, did the Holy One say to Israel: when you go to wage war, you may only open with a parry for peace.” Thus, the Torah

requires the Jewish people to exhaust every possibility of peaceful coexistence before resorting to armed conflict. Judaism considers peace not only an ideological ideal, but a legal imperative. Rambam (Laws of Kings, Chapter 9) rules that a Jewish king “may not wage war with anyone on earth until he first initiates a call for peace...as it is written, ‘When you draw near a city to fight against it, you shall call out to it in peace.’”

The Jewish aspirations for peace expressed in our *parashah* have not dissipated over the years, and now pervade Israel’s attitude towards the Palestinian people. Unfortunately, as Israel reaches out to the Palestinians to reject violence and enter negotiations, the Palestinian leadership has not reciprocated.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would create a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside the Jewish State of Israel. Netanyahu has called for the immediate resumption of peace negotiations with the Palestinians without preconditions and said that he is ready to travel “to Damascus, to Riyadh, to Beirut, to any place” to meet with Arab leaders to discuss ways to end the conflict. However, such talks have not commenced. According to House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD), “I think the largest thing impeding the negotiations at this point is simply the unwillingness of (Palestinian President Mahmoud) Abbas to sit down (with the Israelis).” House Republican Whip Eric Cantor (R-VA) also blamed the Palestinians for the stalled talks. Abbas and leading members of his Fatah party have said talks could not begin until all Palestinian prisoners are released from Israeli jails, all settlement building is frozen and restrictions on the Gaza Strip are lifted, among other demands.

Following the Jewish ethic, Israel has consistently valued and promoted peace over conflict. Tragically, the Palestinian leadership seems to think that this eagerness for peace allows them to set unreasonable demands as preconditions for substantive talks. ■

Caring for the World

Lo tashchit et eitzah – “Do not chop down its trees” (Deuteronomy 20:19)

The Torah prohibits the wanton destruction of nature even in the context of besieging a city. From this verse that forbids the destruction of fruit trees during military operations, we derive the general prohibition of *bal tashchit*, which commands us to refrain from senseless destruction of property and resources. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov (Sefer Haparshiot, Devarim II, p87) explains this prohibition by connecting it to the rest of the verse, which states that “the tree of the field [is] a human.” Just as a person has a soul and feels pain when struck, “so too a growing tree has a life force and feeling.” The Torah implies that we must consider the needs of every living thing, including trees.

Rabbi Kitov’s explanation of the prohibition against the wanton destruction of trees implies that we have a responsibility not just to our own needs, but to the environment as well. One Israeli professor has taken this lesson to heart, and created a sanctuary for the world’s birds to rest as they migrate across the globe.

Professor Reuven Yosef manages a bird sanctuary for approximately 500,000,000 migrating birds that need a place to rest on their journey, the website Israel21c reported. The International Birding and Research Center, which was founded on seven acres of city dump in Eilat, offers food and shelter for birds who are often exhausted and near the end of their strength amidst their extensive migratory journey. The birds typically stop at the center for four to six weeks in order to recuperate from their travels and prepare themselves for the equally long flight that awaits them. “We take birds for granted,” says Yosef. “There are a lot of things that we humans simply do not appreciate enough – whether it is pollination of our crops or eliminating pests, there are whole crops that are dependent upon birds. If we destroy them it is going to destroy us.”

By caring for the world’s bird population, Professor Yosef upholds the principle of environmental activism at the heart of the commandment of *bal tashchit*. Indeed, every tree and every bird really does make a difference. ■