

MARCH 16, 2009

Parashat Vayakhel/Pekudei

A Complete Accounting

Eileh pekudei hamishkan - “These are the accounts of the tabernacle” (Exodus 38:21)

Parashat Pekudei opens with a detailed accounting of the silver and copper collected for the construction of the Tabernacle. Why does Moses provide such a comprehensive financial report? If, as the Torah states, God considered Moses the most “Trusted in all My house,” (Numbers 12:7) then the nation should have trusted Moses as well. In fact, the Israelites did trust Moses in part because he took special precautions to affirm that confidence. Rabbeinu Bachya (on 38:25) notes that, “Moses gave them a specific accounting of each item, and he also placed all [the money] in the hands of Itamar so that Israel would not suspect him, [as they might] had he been the sole treasurer...” Thus, Moses teaches us that even the most trusted caretaker must take steps to confirm the confidence of the people and provide a full and detailed accounting of how communal funds are dispersed.

Today, as the United States embarks on a plan to aid the Palestinian people, it is following Moses’ example and ensuring that the distribution of public funds, in this case in the form of economic aid, is completely transparent.

Recently, at an international donor’s conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced \$900 million in U.S. aid for the Palestinians. This aid is designated as \$600 million to support the Palestinian Authority’s (P.A.) budget shortfalls in the West Bank and \$300 million in humanitarian aid for Gaza, to be distributed through the United Nations and other aid agencies. The U.S. has specifically stated that this aid to Gaza must be handled through such agencies as not to benefit Hamas.

However, as Hamas attempts to enter a unity government with Fatah the chance for this money to benefit terrorists is greatly increased, as is the likelihood of reduced transparency. Fortunately, reports suggest that Secretary Clinton told P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas that the U.S. would withdraw the \$900 million in aid if Fatah enters into a unity government that refuses to meet the expectations of the International Quartet (comprised of the U.S., the E.U., the U.N. and Russia) which include recognition of Israel’s right to exist, renunciation of violence and acceptance of all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. In doing so, the United States has taken a strong step to ensure that any aid to the Palestinians remains completely transparent and out of the hands of terrorists.

Moses set a powerful example in the management of public funds. Today, the U.S. is following this model and denying Hamas’ attempts to use American aid to fund the reconstruction of their terrorist infrastructure. ■

The Women of Israel

Vayavo’u ha’anashim al ha’nashim - “And they arrived, both men and women together” (Exodus 35:22)

Commentators struggle to translate this vague phrase, which on the surface states that the men arrived *al ha’nashim*, literally “on the women.” Rashi and many others explain that while the word *al* normally means “on,” in this case we must translate it as “with” – “the men arrived with the women together.” Ramban (on verses 22-24) explains that the curious language emphasizes the critical role that women played in the construction of the Tabernacle. Ramban

further states that “the verse uses the language of *al ha'nashim* to teach us that the women arrived [with their donations] first and the men were secondary...” While the men certainly gave their fair share of donations, they did so only after they were spurred on by the dedication and excitement of the women of Israel.

The Israelite women played a vital role in constructing the Tabernacle and defining the nature of the nation. Today, this legacy continues as women continue to fill critical positions in Israel, the Middle East's most egalitarian society.

In honor of International Women's Day, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described the growing roles of women in Israeli society. “Women are serving in combat units and fulfilling other positions efficiently, courageously and on a level comparable to that of men. Women are also getting into other professions that used to be the sole province of men. 50 percent of accounting and medical graduates in Israel are women.” Olmert further noted that 21 women were elected to the 18th Knesset, the highest number ever and three more than the previous Knesset. In addition, Israel is also the only country in the world that recruits women by law to compulsory service, a fact that emphasizes the nation's egalitarian nature. Today, women represent 33 percent of all Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers, and can be deployed in 90 percent of all positions within the IDF. Women represent a major segment of manpower in the combat units that they serve in, particularly the Caracal Battalion, an infantry unit in which 70 percent of soldiers are female.

Israel has consistently demonstrated a desire to provide women with opportunities to serve in its most prominent roles throughout society. The focus and drive of Israel's women, like their ancestors in the desert, propel them into positions of leadership throughout the Jewish State. ■

Leaders Must Lead

V'hanesi'im hevi'u eit avnei hashoham - “And the princes brought the onyx stones” (Exodus 35:27)

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:19) contrasts the participation of the princes during the consecration of the Tabernacle with their earlier involvement during its construction. (Numbers 7) During the creation of the Tabernacle the princes failed to take a leadership role and only contributed after the people had already made their donations. To the surprise and chagrin of the princes the Israelites gave so much during the construction that they were left with very little to add. The Midrash notes a criticism of the princes in the text itself, as the Torah spells the word *nesi'im* (“princes”) in an unusually short manner, without the letter *yud*. The princes learned their lesson and when the call came to consecrate the Tabernacle the princes jumped at the opportunity by giving unique and special gifts before anyone else, thus meriting a long description of their donations. (See Numbers 7:1-89)

From the Torah's subtle criticism of the princes we learn that leaders cannot wait for others to take action in matters of importance. Today, the rulers of Iran's Arab neighbors can utilize this lesson as they seek a way to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear regional hegemon.

The head of the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog recently said that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons cannot be halted without the involvement of the Iran's Arab neighbors, Reuters reported. “I find it surprising that the Arab countries are not engaged in dialogue between Iran and the West,” Mohamed El Baradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said. “The neighbors so far have been sitting on the fence. Any solution to the Iranian issue has to engage the neighbors.” The Jordan Times recently reported that “Gulf Arab states are beginning to... [fear] ...their worst nightmare – a nuclear-armed, non-Arab, Shiite Muslim superpower in their neighborhood.” While Arab states have registered concern over Iran's nuclear work, many have been reluctant to enforce truly biting sanctions against the Islamic Republic. As Iran now has enough enriched uranium to fuel a nuclear bomb, all members of the international community must exercise their full diplomatic power to convince Iran to forgo its nuclear program.

The princes' failure to lead in the desert teaches us the importance of leaders being proactive, and not reactionary. Like all members of the international community, the heads of Iran's Arab neighbors must take an active leadership role and seek a diplomatic way to persuade Iran to halt its pursuit of nuclear weapons. ■