

JANUARY 5, 2009

Parashat Vayechi

Blessing Our Children

Vayevarech et Yosef – “and he blessed Joseph” (Genesis 48:15)

Before his death Jacob takes the opportunity to bless his grandchildren in Egypt. After famously crossing his hands we learn that Jacob “blessed Joseph saying, ‘the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long unto this day; the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named in them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.’” Why does the Torah describe Jacob’s blessing of Joseph when in fact he blessed Ephraim and Menashe? Ramban answers that, “in order to bless Joseph in his great love for him, he blessed [Joseph’s] sons.” Thus, Ramban reminds us that as parents the greatest blessing that we can wish for is well-being, peace and prosperity for our children.

This desire for peace for our children continues today. However, for parents of children living in southern Israel, and especially in Sderot, this tranquility remains an elusive goal as their children have grown up in the midst of more than 6,300 rocket and mortar attacks since Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

With each launch a warning system is triggered giving residents just 15 seconds to find shelter, and the constant threat of attack is taking a significant toll on Israel’s citizens. In the city of Sderot nearly two-thirds of children exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and the town’s bus stops have all been converted to reinforced bomb shelters.

Describing life in Sderot in Commentary Magazine, author David Keyes writes, “Another lucky unlucky Sderot resident is Mayer Dahan. Rockets fell on both his synagogue and house—in the exact spot I’m sitting he makes sure to point out. The ceiling of Mayer’s house crashed down on him during the attack and one of his daughters was partially paralyzed. Now his entire family—four children and a wife—sleep together in their tiny one-room bomb shelter. No one even bothers to go upstairs anymore because there is not sufficient time to get the shelter.”

Israel has been forced to defend the safety and security of all of her citizens, especially the children who have a right to grow up without fear as they walk to school, wait for a bus or play in a park. As parents, the greatest blessing we can wish for our children is Jacob’s blessing to Ephraim and Menashe, that “the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads... and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” Israeli parents living in Southern Israel have every right to wish for this blessing for their children as well. ■

Bringing Light to the World

V’inei Yisrael kavdu mi’zoken – “Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age” (Genesis 48:10)

Towards the end of his life Jacob, like his father Isaac before him, suffered from blindness. Commenting on the phrase, “his eyes became heavy,” the Midrash explains that Jacob’s eyelids had become so heavy in his old age that he could not open them independently. This episode reminds us of the privilege of sight that so many of us take for granted, and that our tradition emphasizes repeatedly. From the Talmudic statement equating blindness with death (Nedarim 64b), when we learn that restoring sight can be equated to saving a life, to the traditional morning prayers

when we bless God for “giving sight to the blind,” we are constantly reminded that the sight which every healthy person enjoys is truly a miraculous gift.

Sadly, neither Jacob nor Isaac enjoyed such health later in their lives. Perhaps had they lived in modern times Israeli doctors may have been able to return their eyesight, as they have for others afflicted with ocular illness.

Recently, a four-year-old boy named Salin, who was found in an abandoned sewage canal in Cameroon’s capital, had his eyesight restored by two Israeli doctors. When the boy was found he was blind in one eye and had only minimal sight in the other because his corneas had turned opaque. When doctors in Cameroon decided that an operation could help restore his vision they decided to operate only on the blind eye, so as not to risk his remaining vision in his other eye. With no suitable medical facilities for such an operation in Cameroon, the authorities in the poor African country decided to send him to Israel. Using a new technique, the boy's opaque cornea was removed and a new cornea was transplanted in its stead. In addition, they also transplanted healthy tissue into the other eye to improve its surface. The boy has now returned to Cameroon and his vision is greatly improved.

While both Isaac and Jacob lost their eyesight later in life their descendants are helping to make sure that others do not suffer the same fate. In helping the less fortunate, in bringing sight to the sightless from around the world, Israelis are literally fulfilling the Biblical injunction to serve as a “light unto the nations.” ■

Joseph’s Retribution

V’ata al tira’u, anochi achalkel etchem – “And now do not fear; I will sustain you.” (Genesis 50:21)

Following Jacob’s funeral, Joseph’s brothers return from Canaan fearful of their sibling. Without the presence of Jacob to protect them would Joseph finally unleash his wrath upon his brothers for selling him into slavery so many years before? Would he use his position of power to impoverish them and make them suffer for their sins? Sensing their fear Joseph assuaged his brothers, telling them not to be afraid, that he harbored no ill will and that he would continue to support his brothers and their families. The Midrash (Pesikta D’rav Kahana) calls attention to Joseph’s goodwill, noting that he did not repay his brothers’ animosity in kind, but rather with love and benevolence. In fact, Joseph’s behavior has served as a model for dealing with adversaries throughout Jewish history.

Today, Israel finds itself in a similar situation as Joseph did so long ago, as it is forced to simultaneously fight and support an adversary. While announcing Operation Cast Lead, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert emphasized that Israel’s struggle was not with the citizens of Gaza, but instead with the Hamas regime bent on Israel’s destruction. Through the course of the operation Israel has backed up his words with actions.

Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that despite the ongoing rocket fire, since January 1st more than 93 trucks with approximately 2,500 tons of humanitarian aid, medical supplies and medication were conveyed through the Kerem Shalom cargo terminal into Gaza. Further, 12 Palestinians have entered Israel since the beginning of the operation for medical treatment in Israeli hospitals. In all, since the beginning of Operation Cast Lead some 335 truckloads containing 7,800 tons of aid have been transferred at the request of international organizations, the Palestinian Authority and various governments. According to Israeli government statistics, since last June Israel has facilitated the transfer of 17,000 truckloads of goods into Gaza. Israel also continues to supply some 70 percent of Gaza’s electricity. All of this has taken place as the Hamas terrorist regime lobs thousands of rockets and mortars down on Israel’s southern cities and towns from Gaza.

The people of Israel can rightfully take pride in the fact that while it is forced to defend the freedom of its citizens the circumstances have not robbed Israel of its compassion and humanity. While Israel works to weaken Hamas, like Joseph, the people of Israel are repaying the animosity from Gaza not with further hostility toward the Gazan population, but with humanitarian support, hoping to pave a road to future peace. ■