



# Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 28, 2009

## Parashat Vayechi

### Reinforcing a Commitment

**Vayomer hishavah li – “And he said, ‘swear it to me’” (Genesis 47:31)**

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Realizing that his life was drawing to a close Jacob asked Joseph to bury him in the familial burial plot in the Cave of the Patriarchs. “Promise me” he told Joseph, that “When I sleep with my fathers, you will carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying-place.” Joseph immediately responded in the affirmative before Jacob further implored Joseph, “Swear to me” (47:31). Why did Jacob ask for an additional oath? Ramban explains that the pledge was not for Joseph’s sake but rather for the benefit of Pharaoh. Jacob feared that Pharaoh might be unwilling to allow his second-in-command to leave the country, and therefore he demanded that Joseph swear in order “to strengthen the matter in the eyes of Pharaoh” (see Ramban on 47:31). While Jacob himself accepted Joseph’s word, he realized that Joseph would need to take the additional step to demonstrate his commitment to those outside his family structure.

While Jacob believed that Joseph would bury him in the family’s tomb, he asked his son to take an oath to demonstrate his commitment to the outside world. Nowadays, in recognition of the value of demonstrating one’s commitments, the Jewish state has taken far-reaching steps to exhibit its dedication to peace.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared his willingness to enter negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) without preconditions, and has reinforced this sentiment with actions designed to express Israel’s sincerity. In a landmark effort to galvanize peace talks Israel recently began a 10-month West Bank settlement moratorium and has taken painful steps to ensure its enforcement. The Israeli government has already sent inspectors to at least 70 West Bank communities who have issued stop-work orders and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have handed down injunctions to local and regional councils stripping them of their power to issue construction permits. Moreover, the IDF has ordered these councils to enforce the new building rules and authorities have impounded construction equipment where illegal construction has been found. In addition, since April 2008 Israel has removed nearly 250 roadblocks in the West Bank to ease travel and boost commerce. Yet, despite these wide-ranging efforts the PA and Arab states have rejected the validity of Israel’s moratorium and refused to begin talks unless Israel meets further preconditions. For more on Israel’s commitment to peace, click [here](#).

Joseph’s demonstration of his commitment ultimately proved successful as Pharaoh permitted Joseph to accompany his father’s body to its final resting place. Hopefully, Israel’s efforts to demonstrate its commitment to peace will soon find similar success, and convince the PA to return to the negotiating table. ■

### Underhanded Tactics

**Klei chamas mechoroteihem – “Weapons of violence are their kinship” (Genesis 49:5)**

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Throughout his life Jacob maintained a bias against Simeon and Levi because of their predisposition towards violence, even mentioning their tendency towards bloodshed before his death. Yet, Jacob chose an unusual word to describe their violent characteristic—“*mechoroteihem*.” Hirsch (on verse 49:5) points out that this word can be a derivation of the word for “acquisition” (from the root *karah*). He explains that what most appalled Jacob was that they “used what appeared to be quite friendly means of agreement, made conditions for Shechem to fulfill...and then

used them as the means for the act of dreadful violence.” Perhaps as much as their violent act, Jacob abhorred the underhanded dishonesty which Simeon and Levi utilized to make the destruction of an entire city possible.

Jacob never forgave Simeon and Levi for using insincere negotiations as a part of their violent scheme, a tactic which Iran is attempting to replicate as it tries to prolong negotiations and procure nuclear weapons.

While Iran continues to officially negotiate with the international community, the head of the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program stated that the country is developing more efficient models of centrifuges to enrich uranium. According to Iranian Vice President Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran is “currently producing [a] new generation of centrifuges named IR3 and IR4... We hope to use them by early 2011 after resolving problems and defects.” The move reflects Iran’s ongoing determination to advance its nuclear program despite repeated United Nations (U.N.) Security Council resolutions to halt its uranium enrichment, the key step required to produce nuclear weapons. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also dismissed a year-end deadline for Tehran to accept a U.N.-drafted deal to swap enriched uranium for nuclear fuel and claimed that his government is now “10 times stronger” than a year ago, the Associated Press reports. The international community can give Iran “as many deadlines as they want, we don’t care,” Ahmadinejad told supporters. For more on Iran, visit [www.aipac.org/Iran](http://www.aipac.org/Iran).

While the Obama administration continues to hope that honest engagement will convince Iran to abandon its nuclear pursuits, the Islamic Republic seems to be following in the footsteps of Simeon and Levi. Now, the U.S. Senate should pass comprehensive Iran sanctions legislation to convince Tehran to halt its uranium enrichment. ■

## **Demands for Detainees**

### **Rak tapam v'tzonam u'vkaram azvu -- only their babies, their flocks and their herds, they left (Genesis 50:8)**

Following Jacob’s death a large procession accompanied his body to Canaan, including a sizable Egyptian contingent that joined Jacob’s children in showing respect for the great sage. Curiously, despite the large number of people who traveled from Egypt to Canaan, the Torah states that of the Israelites, “Only their little ones, and their flocks, and their herds, they left in the land of Goshen” (50:8). Why did the Israelites not bring their children to Canaan? Rabbi Isaac Arama, in his commentary *Akedat Yitzchak*, writes that Joseph’s brothers actually did want to bring their children. In fact, they initially did uproot their families, including their children, with the intention of returning to Canaan for good. “But the Pharaoh did not give them permission, for on that day the exile began. For this reason they held back the children and cattle [to force the Israelites] to return to Egypt.”

Pharaoh held the Jewish children in Goshen in order to force the Israelites to return to Egypt following Jacob’s burial. Today, in a similar effort to coerce the Jewish people, Hamas continues to hold captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Hamas, whose affiliates kidnapped Sergeant Shalit in an unprovoked attack inside of Israel in 2006, continues to demand close to 1,000 prisoners currently held by Israel as ransom for Shalit’s safe return. These prisoners include murderers who are personally responsible for the deaths of Israeli civilians. Despite the fact that Israelis find themselves conflicted over a burning desire to bring Shalit home and revulsion for Hamas’ tactics, demands and ideology, representatives of the Jewish state are negotiating for Shalit’s return. Meanwhile, Israeli military and political strategists are acutely aware that such a deal is likely to increase terrorism, lead to the abduction of more soldiers and strengthen Hamas while weakening Fatah. In a recent meeting with the families of victims of terror, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that “when considering the various aspects of the prisoner exchange deal he was guided by the ‘need to retrieve captives and the need to protect Israeli citizens from future harm,’” the *Jerusalem Post* reported. Shalit has been held in captivity for nearly three and a half years.

Pharaoh demonstrated his willingness to sink to almost any level to force the Children of Israel to accede to his wishes and return to Egypt. Today, Hamas is following in his footsteps—using the morally abhorrent tactic of unlawful internment to try and force Israel to release convicted murders. ■