

NOVEMBER 2, 2009

Parashat Vayera

Rushing to Perform Kindness

Vayar vayaratz likratam – “When he saw them, he ran to meet them” (Genesis 18:2)

Abraham has come to be known as the embodiment of *chessed*. While he demonstrated this ethic in numerous ways, his behavior towards the uninvited visitors in this week’s *parashah* highlights his unique devotion to kindness. Three times we read of Abraham’s eagerness to serve the strangers: “When he saw them, he ran to meet them” (18:2); “And Abraham hastened into the tent” (18:6); and “And Abraham ran unto the herd.” (18:7) Ramban (on verse 7) commented on Abraham’s alacrity, “This teaches us his great desire to perform kindness. This great man had three hundred and eighteen men in his house, each one a swordsman...yet he went personally to Sarah’s tent to urge her in the making of the bread.” Abraham’s devotion to kindness manifested itself not simply through his actions, but also in how he performed them: by running to help those in need.

Abraham’s devotion to *chessed*, and his rush to perform acts of kindness, has become a hallmark of the Jewish people. Following in Abraham’s footsteps, an Israeli-led medical team has been rushing across the Philippines to provide medical relief to victims of two recent typhoons.

Braving flooding in the wake of Typhoons Ketsana and Parma, which left at least 930 people dead, seven Israeli doctors and nurses have provided relief to the storm-battered Philippines. The team, organized by IsraAID, first stationed itself in the devastated Luzon region to dispense medical relief to the thousands of people affected by the two typhoons, according to the website Israel21c. The Israeli relief team was then sent on high alert to the capital city of Manila after reports cautioned that another storm was on the way. “We barely sleep five hours a night,” says Elad Seker who headed the IsraAID team in Manila. “We wake up very early and travel by trucks and then boats to remote flooded areas to treat thousands who are waiting for our assistance. After a long day of work in the field we go back to the warehouse to pack medicine for the next day.” According to Seker, the effects of IsraAID have not gone unnoticed “It’s very hard and we are tired, but also feel rewarded that we have the chance to help so many people and that they know that we are here on behalf of Israel and the Jewish communities.”

Through its effort, IsraAID demonstrates how modern Israelis are following in Abraham’s footsteps. Rushing across the globe to help those in need truly embodies both Abraham’s *chessed* and his haste to be of assistance. ■

Approaching the Issues

Vayigash Avraham – “And Abraham drew near” (Genesis 18:23)

According to the Torah, when Abraham was informed of God’s plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah he immediately argued for mercy. “And Abraham drew near [to God] and said, will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (18:23) How does one draw near to an unseen God? Rashi (on verse 23) explained that *vayigash* – and he drew near – suggests that Abraham did not physically approach God, but rather the word applies to Abraham’s attitude. As Rashi states, we find the word *vayigash* elsewhere in the Torah in the contexts of battle, of appeasement and of prayer. “To do all three of these Abraham ‘approached’: to speak harshly, to appease and to pray.” Thus, the

word *vayigash* does not describe Abraham's physical action, but rather helps us understand the different techniques which Abraham used to speak up and try to save the condemned cities.

Instead of being resigned to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham felt an obligation to try and influence events. In doing so, Abraham set an example for his descendants to emulate, exhorting us to use our time and energy to make the world a better place.

All too often we want to take action to support the U.S.-Israel relationship, but we feel intimidated by the prospect of getting involved in the political process. Feeling that we do not know what to do, we resign ourselves to do nothing at all. In fact, getting involved simply requires that we exert ourselves and vocalize our support for the U.S.-Israel relationship. In politics, important policy decisions are often affected by relationships. Our elected officials are expected to be experts on such a wide range of issues that they must depend on others, including their staffs and ordinary citizens, to keep them current on all of the matters that fall under their purview. For the Jewish community, it is imperative that we become the people that our Representatives depend on for information about Israel. If we organize regular district-office meetings with our members of Congress to discuss the U.S.-Israel relationship, and invite them into our synagogue to speak about the issues, we can become a trusted resource and help influence U.S. policy towards Israel.

A desire to engage on behalf of our fellow Jews inspires our efforts to secure Israel's future. Just as Abraham refused to stay silent, we too must speak up, build relationships and work to ensure the Jewish State's survival. ■

The Strength of Honesty

V'hochee'ach Avraham et Avimelech – “And Abraham reproved Abimelech” (Genesis 21:25)

The Torah chronicles the tense peace negotiations between Abraham and the Philistine king Abimelech. After Abimelech had petitioned Abraham for unconditional peace, Abraham seemed to make an unusual break from the cordial relationship between the two parties. “Abraham reproved Abimelech because of the well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away.” Why did Abraham choose this moment to rebuke his potential peace partner? The Midrash (Sifrei Devarim 2) viewed Abraham's rebuke not as a sign of a weak relationship, but instead as a sign of its strength. “This teaches us that rebuke leads to peace, as we see with Abraham.” Because Abraham spoke honestly with Abimelech, and excoriated him to return the well, the two were able to conduct honest negotiations on the remaining issues, as we read: “And they two made a covenant.” (21:27)

Abraham understood that in order to achieve peace two parties need to be honest with each other. Today, in order for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to be successful, the two parties must follow Abraham's lead, be honest about the issues and not allow a biased United Nations report to obfuscate the complex situation.

As the Obama administration tries to revive Mideast peace negotiations, Palestinian and other Arab leaders are mounting a campaign at the United Nations (U.N.) to isolate Israel. Ignoring Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, which clearly establishes the right of every nation to act in self-defense against those who willfully attack innocent citizens, the U.N. Human Rights Council has endorsed the findings of the Goldstone Report. The report explicitly fails to recognize Israel's actions in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead were part of a legitimate response to ongoing rocket and terrorist attacks by Hamas and other terrorist groups. Instead, the report equates the actions of a terrorist group (Hamas) with those of a democratic country (Israel) reluctantly taking action to defend itself from terrorism while taking unprecedented steps to minimize civilian casualties. Now, reneging on a commitment to the United States Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has asked various U.N. bodies to endorse the Goldstone Report. Such biased action by the U.N. will likely frustrate American efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The United States must follow in Abraham's footsteps and promote honesty in the U.N. The Obama administration should oppose any endorsement or further consideration of the Goldstone Report. In doing so, the U.S. will bring a reasonable voice to the world forum and help avoid the peace process becoming mired in dishonest rhetoric. ■

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