

DECEMBER 21, 2009

Parashat Vayigash

Dishonest Intentions

Hayesh lachem av oh ach – “Have you a father or a brother?” (Genesis 44:19)

The Torah describes Judah’s appeal for Benjamin’s freedom, including Judah’s seemingly innocuous narration of the events leading up to Benjamin’s incarceration. “My lord asked his servants, saying: Have you a father or a brother?” The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah: chapter 93) however ascribes a more significant meaning to Judah’s words, inserting a sense of frustration with Joseph and suspicion about the events leading up to this point. According to the Midrash, Judah did not plead with Joseph but rather Judah accused him of subterfuge and deceit. “Said Judah [to Joseph], know that you questioned us with a plot in mind. How many countries descended to Egypt to purchase food? Did you question any of them the way that you questioned us? Nonetheless, we remained honest with you.” Seeing that politesse failed, Judah finally confronted Joseph in the hopes that Joseph would end his deceit and engage honestly.

After Judah experienced so many inexplicable occurrences in his dealings with Joseph he finally abandoned pretense and confronted his brother. In modern times, the U.S. House of Representatives has reached this same tipping point in America’s dealings with Iran. Concluding that the Islamic Republic has disingenuously approached talks, Congress has taken an important step in its efforts to convince Tehran to halt its uranium enrichment.

In an overwhelming bipartisan vote, the U.S. House of Representatives recently passed the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA, H.R. 2194) by a vote of 412 to 12. The legislation seeks to reinforce American diplomacy by dramatically increasing economic pressure on Iran to stop its illicit pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. The bill, introduced by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-CA) and Ranking Member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), contains sanctions curtailing Iran’s ability to import and produce refined petroleum. These measures could have a severe impact on the Iranian economy, forcing the regime to confront a real choice: Continue its illicit nuclear program and risk economic ruin, or suspend the program and open the door to relief from sanctions. As President Obama has said, “If Iran does not take steps in the near future to live up to its obligations, then the United States will not continue to negotiate indefinitely, and we are prepared to move towards increased pressure.”

The House vote comes after Iran repeatedly spurned the president’s diplomatic overtures, instead choosing to press ahead with its efforts to enrich uranium—a key step toward building an atomic bomb. The Senate must now pass the companion legislation, which encompasses the Senate version of IRPSA (S.908) as well as the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act (S.1065), which passed in the House by a vote of 414 to 6. For more on Iran sanctions, click [here](#).

According to the Midrash, it was Judah’s confrontation of Joseph that ultimately caused Joseph to change his behavior and reveal his true identity. Hopefully, with the passing of IRPSA Iran will recognize America’s resolve and abandon its nuclear ambitions. Otherwise, Iran will bear the brunt of crippling economic sanctions. ■

The Best Medicine

V’ata al tei’atzvu – “And now be not grieved” (Genesis 45:5)

As he sent his brothers back to Canaan to retrieve their father, Joseph warned them not to blame each-other for their terrible sin that led to his exile in Egypt. Yet, before he said “be not angry with yourselves,” Joseph told them “And

now be not grieved” (45:5). Why did Joseph tell his brothers not to be sad? Rabbi Moshe HaKohen of Djerba (Tunisia) explained in his work *Darkei Moshe* that by using this language Joseph taught his brothers a critical lesson, that sadness and depression have the power to destroy life. Rabbi Moshe wrote, “This matter is agreed both by doctors and from the words of our Sages...that worry and sadness are literally like drinking poison. If a person suffers from constant worry and yet finds his body healthy—there is no doubt that he does not feel nor recognize that his strengths are slowly diminishing—be they physical, spiritual, or intellectual.”

Joseph’s admonition to his brothers about the harmful effects of sadness is still relevant today. In fact, in an effort to optimize the healing power of joy the University of Haifa has recently initiated a degree program for medical clowns.

Considered to be staff at many hospitals, medical clowns relieve stress and uplift patients thereby creating an environment that facilitates treatment and can even improve prognosis. According to the website *Israel21c*, until now medical clown training was a combination of seminars and common sense. After a successful pilot, the University of Haifa, in collaboration with the Magi Foundation, is pioneering a first-in-the-world, three-year academic program for medical clowns, also known as Dream Doctors. “I saw a group of people that are extremely talented,” said Professor Ada Spitzer of the University of Haifa, “But I was thinking that it would be very beneficial for these people to have an academic education so that they will be able to improve their intervention based on knowledge.” “The results are better,” said Dr. Hertzal Gavriel, head of oncology at Ha’emek Hospital, “There is no end to the research that proves that if you are optimistic, in a good mood and laughing, your immune system improves.”

Joseph would have agreed completely. And he would have been overjoyed to see his descendants utilizing his advice to bring joy and healing to sick children in the Land of Israel. ■

Tangible Benefits

Eretz Mitzrayim lefanecha – “The land of Egypt is before you” (Genesis 47:6)

Pharaoh granted Joseph’s request to position his family in Goshen, a location that would allow them to properly care for their flocks. Going even further, Pharaoh offered the Israelites “the best of the land.” However, he made a request in return. “And if you know any men of valor among them, then make them rulers over my cattle.” Rashi explains that Pharaoh used the term “men of valor” to determine if Joseph’s brothers were “expert in their craft of shepherding sheep.” Pharaoh hoped that the brothers would not only raise their own sheep in Goshen, but that with their expertise they would also teach the Egyptians to be successful herders, thereby enhancing the Egyptian economy.

Under Joseph’s leadership Pharaoh shared the wealth of Egypt with the Israelites, initiating a mutually beneficial relationship. Today, the United States enjoys a similar relationship with Israel. By providing critical defense aid to the Jewish state, America helps secure her own interests both in the region and at home.

Congress recently passed the foreign aid bill for fiscal year 2010, which includes \$2.22 billion in security assistance to Israel. When combined with the \$555 million approved in an earlier bill, the total amount of aid to Israel in fiscal year 2010 comes to \$2.775 billion—a \$225 million increase from fiscal year 2009. Aid to Israel has long been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy and a cost-effective way of serving America’s national-security interests in the region. Joint U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation helps develop new technologies for protecting American and Israeli soldiers and allows Israel to maintain its qualitative military edge in the region, freeing the United States to focus its resources on other areas of concern. Moreover, the bulk of U.S. military aid is spent by Israel on American defense products, boosting the American economy and providing vital jobs in the United States. For more on American aid to Israel, click [here](#).

Pharaoh opened his land to Joseph’s family because he understood the benefits that his country would receive. Nowadays, the U.S.-Israel relationship is based on stronger bonds, the shared values of freedom and democracy. It is because of these bonds that America now provides Israel with the means to help itself, and help the United States in return. ■