



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 9, 2009

Parashat Yitro

Not Going-it Alone

Lo tuchal asohu levadecha - “you are not able to perform it yourself alone” (Exodus 18:18)

When Jethro came to visit the Jewish camp he witnessed Moses sitting from morning until night dealing with the nation’s problems. Observing the inefficiency, Jethro told Moses that while well-intentioned his methodology would ultimately fail. “The thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it yourself alone.” Ultimately, serving as the solitary leader, judge and teacher for the entire nation would prove too much of a burden – both for Moses and also for the people eager to see him. Jethro advised Moses to procure assistance to share the responsibility of leading and teaching the people. The Midrash (Mechilta) offers a parable: Jethro said to Moses, “Do you see this heavy beam? Two or three people cannot lift it. But when four or five try, they are able to rise to the challenge [and lift the beam].” Moses followed his father-in-law’s advice and instituted a system of lower and upper courts, alleviating his overwhelming workload and achieving his ultimate goal of best serving the nation.

From Jethro’s lesson we understand that even great leaders cannot accomplish difficult tasks alone. Just as Moses, the greatest leader in Jewish history, could not carry the weight by himself, so too does the United States need assistance today. The international community must work with the U.S. to use all diplomatic, political and economic approaches to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Iran is rapidly advancing its nuclear program and may have already enriched a sufficient quantity of uranium to produce a nuclear weapon. The United States has declared a desire to engage Iran diplomatically, but it needs the assistance of the international community to achieve the goal of curtailing Iranian nuclear ambitions. In order for engagement to be effective the process must not be open-ended and it must be coupled with the threat of unilateral and multilateral economic and diplomatic penalties if Iran continues to use negotiations as a stalling tactic. While the Obama administration and the international community have both endorsed this “dual-track” approach to engagement with Iran, thus far repeated U.S. overtures to Iran have been met with a long list of Iranian preconditions for dialogue, including the removal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and a refusal to halt nuclear activity.

The United States is leading efforts to find a diplomatic path to halt Iran’s nuclear program, but it needs the support of the international community who must impose more robust economic, diplomatic and political sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Like Moses leading the Israelites, deterring Iran’s nuclear program is a very heavy load weighing on the world’s shoulders. The U.S. must continue to lead, but we can not do it alone. ■

Above and Beyond

Et haderech yelchu bah - “the way they must walk” (Exodus 18:20)

Jethro, in describing the duties that a judge and leader of Israel must have, told Moses that he must teach his new judges “the statutes and the laws, and show them the way they must walk.” While a judge must obviously know the laws and statutes of Jewish life, what did Jethro refer to when he mentioned “the way they must walk?” Targum Yonatan explains that Jethro meant that the leaders should not only study the statutes and laws, but should also study “the prayers of the synagogue, and the teaching that they should visit the sick, and bury the dead, and perform acts of

kindness, and uphold justice, and go above the call of justice for the wicked.” This notion of *lifnim mishurat hadin*, acting above the call of justice, has been a hallmark of Jewish leadership throughout our history.

Targum Yonatan’s advocacy of acting above normal moral obligations continues to be a fundamental principle of Judaism. Nowadays we have seen the Jewish State meticulously live up to this standard, even during her recent battle with Hamas in Gaza.

Despite the fact that it was the civilians of Gaza who elected the terrorist organization Hamas to lead them, Israel took great pains to protect the population of Gaza during Operation Cast Lead. When Israel was forced to respond to Hamas’ attacks on Israeli citizens it took unprecedented steps to deter Gazan civilians from Hamas positions, placing tens of thousands of phone calls warning residents in hazardous areas. Israel suspended military activity each day to allow humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip, even as “Hamas raided some 100 aid trucks that Israel had allowed into Gaza, stole their contents and sold them to the highest bidders,” according to the Jerusalem Post. Israel continued to send medical supplies into Gaza as well, knowing that Hamas was “pilfering a significant portion of the medicine allowed into the Strip... to treat its operatives wounded in fighting with the IDF.” As British Colonel (ret.) Richard Kemp commented on the BBC, “I don’t think there’s ever been a time in the history of warfare when any army has made more efforts to reduce civilian casualties and deaths of innocent people than the IDF is doing today in Gaza.”

Israel considers its moral obligation towards civilians to be an important facet of the state. As such, Israel upholds the value of acting *lifnim mishurat hadin*, above the call of justice, even at the risk of relieving those who flout every basic humanitarian law in the process. ■

Medical Wings of Eagles

Va’esa etchem al kanfei nesharim - “how I bore you on eagles’ wings” (Exodus 19:4)

The Torah states that God used the phrase “on eagles’ wings” to remind Moses of the deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt. What did God mean by this phrase? Many commentators understand it as a reference to divine transportation, explaining that God conveyed the people in a miraculous manner, allowing them to traverse the dangerous desert quickly and safely. However, Rashbam (on verse 4) explains the words differently, stating that because eagles fly higher than most other birds they carry their young on their backs putting their children’s well-being ahead of their own. Thus, Rashbam notes that the Jewish people survived the exodus “without suffering injury,” a sign of miraculous protection.

While this type of divine protection is directly related to the story of the exodus, similar miracles of protection continue even in our times. In fact, in the midst of the heavy fighting that took place during Operation Cast Lead Second Lieutenant Aharon Karov experienced such a miracle.

Karov, who was on leave in order to get married, was ordered to cut his furlough short and report for duty in Gaza the morning after his wedding, according to Ynetnews.com. The next time his wife Tzvia saw him was in a hospital, with doctors predicting his imminent death from wounds incurred in battle. Yet, only three weeks later Karov was released from Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikva. Aharon’s doctors agree that his rapid recovery is miraculous. “When he was brought in everyone was pessimistic and thought his hours were numbered. The injuries were very bad...” Dr. Steve Jackson, the neurosurgeon who operated on Karov immediately after his injury, stated “Things were extremely bad, I told the family he [had] serious head trauma. They all cried, his wife too...” While, Karov’s amazing recovery is certainly miraculous, he still has a long road to recovery according to his father, “Physically he can do just about everything, but he is still very weak and hasn’t regained his strength yet. He can walk and move all his limbs, although movement is limited in his left arm, which has 300 pieces of shrapnel imbedded in it.”

The strange phrase of the Torah references the type of events that seem limited to extreme circumstances in biblical times. However, in light of Lieutenant Karov’s remarkable recovery, it could be said that in these modern times he was brought forth from Gaza “on eagles’ wings.” ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.