

SEPTEMBER 27, 2010

Shemini Atzeret & Parashat Bereishit

Praying for Legitimacy (for Shemini Atzeret)

Our woes engulf our souls like water (Prayer for Rain)
(גשם)

כי נפשנו אפפו מים (תפילת)

Each year on Shemini Atzeret, during the prayer for rain, the *chazzan* chants a poem invoking the memories of our forefathers in the context of water. Abraham “followed [God] like rain,” Isaac was born after Abraham told the angels “let you take a bit of water,” etc. While each verse refers to water in a positive tone, the final stanza takes a darker direction. In asking God to remember the 12 tribes of Israel who passed through the waters of the Sea of Reeds, the poet adds: “To their offspring, whose blood was spilt for you like water, turn to us—for woes engulf our souls like water.” The water that until this point represented a source of life suddenly came to symbolize the threat of drowning. For this reason we pray not only for God’s blessings of rain, but also for the self-sufficiency and independence to protect the Jewish nation.

The final stanza of the prayer for rain alludes to the attack and degradation of the Jewish people by those who wished to harm us. Today, even as Israel faces the specter of such a physical assault from Iran, Hamas or Hizballah, it also finds itself under the attack of world leaders who question the legitimacy of the Jewish state’s existence.

During a jarring speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad questioned the legitimacy of both our understanding of the September 11th terrorist attacks and the existence of the State of Israel—all in the same sentence. [The New York Times](#) reports that “He [Ahmadinejad] said there were three theories about the origins of the Sept. 11 attacks, including ‘that some segments within the U.S. government orchestrated the attack to reverse the declining American economy and its grips on the Middle East in order also to save the Zionist regime.’” Responding directly to this and other attempts to delegitimize Israel, President Barack Obama told the General Assembly that “Israel is a sovereign state, and the historic homeland of the Jewish people. It should be clear to all that efforts to chip away at Israel’s legitimacy will only be met by the unshakeable opposition of the United States.”

The conclusion of the prayer for rain reminds us that for almost two millennia Jews have suffered at the hands of those who questioned our right to exist. Fortunately, America’s strong support for Israel represents the actualization of our prayers for blessings for the Jewish people and the state of Israel. ■

Heaven(s) and Earth (for Bereishit)

And God called the firmament heaven (Genesis 1:8)

ויקרא אלקים לרקיע שמים (בראשית א:ח)

The Torah states that on the first day of creation God constructed “the heavens and the Earth” (1:1). What then were the heavens that in verse eight the Torah states God created on the second day? Ramban (on 1:8) suggests that the later heavens, created by separating “waters under the firmament from waters above the firmament” (1:7), refer to the skies that we see from the ground. The heavens in verse one refer to the upper heavens, “which are not part of the lower sphere.” Therefore, we can understand verse one to read: “In the beginning, God created space and the Earth.”

As mankind has harnessed the wonders of technology to climb above the skies and reach the great void of space, the reference to the heavens in Genesis takes on new meaning, especially in Israel—a country that has embarked upon a new initiative to create a thriving space industry.

The Israeli government has promised to inject its space program with \$80 million of cash every year for the next five years in an effort to kick-start a potential \$10 billion-a-year business in the world's \$250 billion space industry. According to the [Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), what began as a defense effort prompted by the need to monitor activities in neighboring countries has burgeoned into a full-fledged industry producing communication and propulsion systems as well as advanced satellite technology. These satellites have valuable civilian uses including scientific research, environmental study and weather detection. According to Director General of Israel's Space Agency Zvi Kaplan, "One must think about what kind of country we want to build. We want to build a country that our young people will not leave. Space is not the only idea, but it's a very good agenda. Nowadays there are more civilian applications, and space plays an important role in science. Most of the new discoveries in science will come from space."

For centuries we read the first verse of the Torah without the means to approach those heavens. Now, when we read this verse, we can think of the great potential for the Jewish state. ■

Conditions for Failure (for Bereishit)

You shall not eat from it nor shall you touch it (Genesis 3:3) (בראשית ג:ג) לא תאכלו ממנו ולא תגעו בו

While attempting to convince Eve to eat from the forbidden fruit, the serpent found a tragic error in her argument and utilized it to entrap her. In their initial discussion, after the serpent noted how God had forbidden humanity from eating from the fruit of the garden, Eve explained that in fact they could eat from any tree but two, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Yet, Eve added an additional condition, telling the serpent that from those trees God commanded, "You shall not eat from them, *nor shall you touch them*, lest you die" (3:3). The serpent, recognizing that Eve had added the condition not to touch the trees, told her "You shall surely not die" (3:4). Rashi explains that "[the serpent] pushed her until she touched [the tree] and said, 'Just as there is no death for those who touch it, so too there is no death for those who eat from it.'" Not realizing that it was she herself who had added the extra condition, Eve accepted this argument and ate from the fruit.

As Eve demonstrated, extraneous conditions can have tragic consequences. Unfortunately, when it comes to negotiations with Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has followed Eve's erroneous path by placing unneeded conditions on talks with the Jewish state.

In November of 2009 Israel implemented an unprecedented 10-month moratorium on construction of new homes in the West Bank. This step was meant as a gesture of goodwill to the PA in the hopes of convincing PA President Mahmoud Abbas to enter into peace negotiations with Israel. However, despite this step, the Palestinians refused to engage in direct talks for the first nine months of the moratorium, placing additional conditions for their participation. The Palestinians did finally agree to direct talks with Israel, but only in the final month of the moratorium. In the days before the moratorium was set to expire, Abbas repeated his condition that if the moratorium expired he would walk away from the talks. This condition was placed in spite of the fact that Israel and the Palestinians have previously agreed that settlements are a final-status issue to be resolved in negotiations, and despite Israel's commitment to continuing talks even after its citizens had been murdered in terrorist attacks. Just before the moratorium was set to expire more than 85 senators signed onto a bipartisan letter calling for Abbas to stay in direct talks with Israel and to stop threatening to leave the talks if Israel did not extend the moratorium. Senators Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Bob Casey (D-PA), Johnny Isakson (R-GA), and Richard Burr (R-NC) led the effort. For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

Eve's downfall was a result of her own extraneous condition. The international community must clearly communicate to the Palestinians that their own conditions notwithstanding, peace can only come through direct, honest and ongoing negotiations. ■

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.