

JANUARY 18, 2010

Parashat Bo

The Kindness of Warnings

Chatati l'Adonai eloheichem – “I have sinned against the Lord your God” (Exodus 10:16)

Following the plague of darkness Pharaoh declared to Moses and Aaron that he had sinned, but he did not specify what sin he had committed. Pharaoh committed many sins and could have been referring to the enslavement of the Jewish people or the genocide he perpetrated against Jewish male babies. However, Chizkuni suggests that Pharaoh sinned by ignoring the kindness shown to him by God. Yet, with nine harsh plagues having just been unleashed upon Pharaoh and his people, why would Pharaoh think that God had been kind to him? Pharaoh recognized that the many warnings he had received prior to the plagues emanated from divine kindness. Therefore, according to Chizkuni, Pharaoh recognized that he had sinned by ignoring these warnings and rejecting the *chessed* therein.

Like Moses' warnings to Pharaoh, the United States has demonstrated great kindness by issuing repeated warnings to Iran to halt its illicit nuclear program—giving Tehran every opportunity to engage in diplomacy and avert sanctions. Yet, like Pharaoh, Iran has continually ignored that kindness.

At his inauguration President Barack Obama expressed his desire to engage in diplomacy to deter Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Yet, throughout the engagement process Obama has continually warned that the Islamic Republic should not view America's desire for dialogue as a sign of weakness, and that the United States would push for strong sanctions if necessary. In keeping with this policy the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act (IRPSA). The legislation, passed on December 15th, would limit Iran's ability to import and produce refined petroleum products by requiring the president to impose sanctions on companies helping Iran in these areas. The Senate is considering similar measures as part of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (S. 2799). For more on this legislation, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

Like Pharaoh, Iran has ignored repeated warnings and opportunities to change its ways. It finally took the ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to change his policy and release the Israelites. Now, the Senate should pass the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act to demonstrate its resolve to prevent nuclear proliferation and to convince the Islamic Republic to change its policy. ■

Self-Defeating Policy

Al tosef re'ot panai – “See my face no more...” (Exodus 10:28)

Finally fed up with Moses' demands and months of plagues, Pharaoh warned Moses to never again present himself before the monarch, “For on the day you see my face you shall die” (10:28). Ibn Ezra explains that Pharaoh amended Egypt's national law to indicate that Moses' presence before Pharaoh constituted sedition punishable by execution. Ironically, Pharaoh's decree did not prove detrimental to Moses, but rather to himself and the Egyptian people. On the night of Passover, following the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh wished to rush the Jewish people out of Egypt—but he could not see Moses in person. Sforno (on verse 29) explains that when Pharaoh did call on Moses and Aaron to take the Israelites and leave Egypt, he did so indirectly, by means of a messenger. Despite a desperate need to see Moses, Pharaoh's own law prevented him from doing so.

Egyptian law ultimately hindered Pharaoh's ability to conduct policy. Similarly, British law—which has been exploited to allow arrest warrants to be issued against Israeli leaders for their roles in Israeli military operations—hinders its ability to conduct policy by making it more difficult for Britain to be involved in Middle East diplomacy.

Recently, a British magistrate issued an arrest warrant for Member of Knesset and former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni at the behest of lawyers acting for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. “The campaign [initiated] by Hamas [took] advantage of an aspect of law in England and Wales that allows anyone to apply for an arrest warrant for alleged war crimes without the need for a prosecuting lawyer... Hamas says that it initiated the move,” *The London Times* reports. Hamas specifically chose Britain because its libel tourism laws allow for the prosecution of foreign citizens for war crimes committed on foreign soil. Recently, high-ranking Israeli military officers called off a planned visit to Britain for fear of the sudden issuing of an arrest warrant. Sadly, Hamas is exploiting a British law intended to protect the rights of innocent victims around the world to punish Israel for defending its citizens against unprovoked mortar and rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip. More importantly, the legal jeopardy faced by Israeli politicians and military officers could damage Britain's efforts to play a role in Middle East peacemaking. According to a statement from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “If Israeli leaders cannot visit Britain in an appropriate and respectable manner it will be a natural obstacle to Britain's wish to fulfill an active role in the Middle East peace process.”

While Pharaoh was able to use an intermediary to convey his message to Moses, no such mechanism exists to circumvent the exploitation of British law. Unfortunately, if Britain fails to amend the law, the greatest victim will not be Israeli military or political leaders, but the prospects for lasting peace in the Middle East. ■

Connecting Our Children – Today and Tomorrow

V'haya ki yishalcha bincha machar – “And it shall be when your son asks you tomorrow” (Exodus 13:14)

The Torah devotes six verses to the command for us to relate the story of the Exodus to our children. In the beginning of these verses we read, “And you shall tell your son on that day,” (13:8) and in the conclusion we read, “And it shall be when your son asks you tomorrow, saying: What is this?” (13:14). The authors of the Passover Seder understood these verses to refer to two specific types of children: the *tam*, the simple son who asks, “What is this?” and the *she'eino yodea lishol*, the son “who doesn't know how to ask.” In each case the Torah commands us to relate the critical facts surrounding the redemption in order to transmit the values inherent in Judaism to future generations. Rashi, commenting on verse 14, notes that “there is the ‘tomorrow’ of right now and there is the ‘tomorrow’ of the distant future.” Thus, the Torah is reminding us that whether at that moment thousands of years ago or many generations later, we cannot ignore the critical and timeless power of education.

The Torah commands us to educate our children about the lessons of redemption at Passover. Today, our children can most easily act on these important lessons by engaging in activities to help secure the future of the state of Israel.

In light of the fact that many of our children are students who are not yet old enough to vote, it may seem difficult to find ways to involve them in political activism. However, there are many ways in which they can advocate on behalf of Israel. In this election year, our children can learn about the candidates and volunteer on a campaign of their choice. Our children can write editorials in their student newspapers or help pass a resolution in their student government condemning the Goldstone Report or denouncing Iran for its destabilizing role in the Middle East. Further, students can circulate a petition about these issues and send it to their members of Congress or start a Congressional letter writing campaign. Students can also regularly post pro-Israel comments and links to articles on Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other social networking sites to engage their friends in Israel-related issues.

By twice referring to education in the framework of the Exodus, the Torah teaches us that without the continued transmission of Jewish values to our children the Exodus would be incomplete. Today we must pass this lesson on to our children in the form of pro-Israel advocacy. After all, supporting Israel is not just a Jewish value for today, but for tomorrow as well. ■

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.