

SEPTEMBER 6, 2010

Parashat Ha'azinu – Shabbat Shuvah

Effective Speech

My doctrine shall drop as the rain (Deuteronomy 32:2)

יערף כמטר לקחי (דברים)

(ל:ב)

Parashat Ha'azinu takes on the poetic form “*shira*,” a metaphoric explanation of fundamental philosophical principals. To convey his message, Moses uses the power of imagery and language in the hopes that his words strike a chord in the people. To open his important message to the Jewish people Moses prays to God that his words, “drop as the rain.” What does he mean? Ibn Ezra (on 32:2) explains that Moses prays that his words should enter into people and have an effect, “that his words would be like the dew and rain and not be rejected...[and] enter the hearts of his audience like the rain on the earth brings produce and growth.”

Moses understood that words can either be ignored or they can have the powerful ability to effect change. In this context, it is encouraging to see that the words of the international community are already having a strong effect in the effort to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

After the U.N. Security Council passed a comprehensive Iran sanctions resolution in June, the United States, the European Union, Canada and Australia each followed suit by speaking up and enacting even tougher sanctions in July. If fully implemented, these sanctions—and the international consensus underlying them—have the potential to pressure Iran to stop enriching uranium. Although this outcome is far from assured, the sanctions have already begun to bite, and Tehran has indicated that it is open to talks. While the United States has virtually no trade or investments in Iran because of previous sanctions laws, the European Union is Iran's top trading and investment partner. Iran can no longer pretend that it's “business as usual”. In fact, there are already a number of positive signs—due to the refusal of Lloyd's of London and other major insurance companies to insure tankers delivering gasoline to Iran, fuel imports are already dropping—a serious blow to Iran, which depends on imports for approximately a third of its domestic gasoline consumption. In addition, some Iranian cargo ships have been unable to leave Iranian ports because nobody will insure them. Additionally, European airports have refused to refuel Iranian airliners. All of this has occurred within just days or weeks of the enactment of new sanctions.

Initially full of defiance and bravado, the Iranian regime has been rattled. Iranian leaders are now sending more conciliatory messages. Like Moses, who prayed that his words could be as powerful at reaching his people as the rain is to the land, American efforts to isolate Iran through sanctions are showing the powerful impact words can have. ■

Taking Responsibility

The Rock, whose work is perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4)

הצור תמים פעלו (דברים)

(ד:ב)

The Midrash notes that while we might not understand all of God's actions, we still trust in their wisdom. For this reason we quote this verse during the Jewish funeral service. Even in our time of pain and loss we declare wholeheartedly that while we cannot fathom God's wisdom, we nevertheless accept it with faith. The Midrash (Midrash Shochar Tov 92) also adds the critical concept of accepting responsibility for the outcomes of our own

actions. “They said to Moses, ‘Who caused you not to enter the Land [of Israel]? He said to them, ‘I caused it.’ They responded, ‘But was it not God who did this to you?’ Moses said to them, ‘Heaven forbid!’” Moses’ response indicates his understanding that while God meted out his punishment, he alone bore responsibility for the results of his own sinful behavior.

Moses understood that he could not blame God for his own errors and accepted that he alone must accept responsibility for his actions. As the Palestinian Authority and Israel undertake direct talks, the Palestinian Authority, like Moses, must accept responsibility for its actions in order to allow the talks to progress in a positive direction.

For more than six decades, Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to make painful sacrifices—altering borders, relinquishing territory and uprooting entire communities—in the pursuit of peace. Just last week, after Hamas terrorists murdered four Israeli civilians in cold blood, Israel again refused to abandon the talks. The issues to be resolved—borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees and security—are deeply complicated and will require sustained effort and tangible compromise. While the AFP reported that, “The Palestinians say that a renewal of settlement activities after September 26, when a 10-month partial moratorium expires, would end the negotiations,” Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said in a statement that, “Israel does not condition its participation in the talks on the Palestinian Authority regaining control of the Gaza Strip or rehabilitating West Bank refugee camps to find a solution for refugees outside Israel’s borders... We are not looking for excuses to stop the negotiations. The opposite, we came here to find a real solution without preconditions.” President Abbas should not be given cause to think that Palestinian withdrawal from tough discussions will lead to U.S. pressure on Israel. Rather, the administration must make it crystal clear at the outset that the United States expects the negotiations to continue without threats or walkouts.

Moses recognized that he himself bore responsibility for his fate. The leadership of the Palestinian Authority must quickly come to the same conclusion and match Israel’s commitment to conducting peace talks without preconditions or excuses, demonstrating a willingness to make vital compromises at the negotiating table. ■

Taking Our Words – Shabbat Shuvah

Take with you words and return to the Lord (Hosea 14:3)

קחו עמכם דברים ושובו אל ה' (הושע יד:ג)

Hosea, in his powerful call to repentance that we read on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, (called Shabbat Shuvah), utilizes this strange formulation. What does he mean when he tells us to, “Take with you words?” How do we take words? Radak (on 14:3) explains that Hosea demands that our repentance be more than mere lip service. “[I ask of you] good words – that you should confess to God your sins, and return to God with your hearts, and not only with your lips.” Hosea reminds us that in repentance, confession is not enough. Our words must represent our inner feelings. Only when we “take our words” from our hearts can our repentance carry meaning.

Repentance becomes meaningful when we use our words to convey inner feeling. Similarly, when we communicate and advocate for Israel, that communication is especially meaningful because our words are not just talk, but convey our deep passion for the safety and security of the Jewish State.

Every day, scores of pro-Israel activists take the time to get to know their members of Congress and build the relationships that help shape U.S. policy and American support for Israel. These relationships provide not only information key to keeping elected officials aware of issues central to Israel, but also convey the critical fact to our representatives that their constituents are passionate about a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. In their legislative agendas, our elected officials find themselves bombarded with a myriad of issues, from the economy to social security, healthcare to energy. We cannot take it as a given that they will put Israel at the top of their legislative agendas and devote valuable time and energy to the issue. Only if we convey the fact that Israel is important to us will it be important to our elected officials as well—and for that reason we must take action and express our support.

Hosea reminded us that our repentance is only meaningful if our words convey an inner feeling. Similarly, when we advocate for Israel and “take our words” to our elected officials, we must communicate our passion and devotion to a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. ■

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