

AUGUST 30, 2010

Parashat Netzavim-Vayelech

An Alternate Vision of Truth

For I walk in the stubbornness of my heart (Deuteronomy 29:18)
אלך

כי בשרירות לבי (דברים כט:יח)

Moses takes great pains warning the Jewish people to refrain from engaging in idolatry, describing in vivid detail the repercussions of ignoring the word of God. Moses describes the type of person who deliberately ignores these threats as one who, “Bless[es] himself in his heart, saying: ‘I shall have peace.’ How does this person so casually deny God’s words? The verse continues, “For I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.” What does this phrase mean? Rashi explains that he follows “the visions of [his] heart,” (see Rashi on 29:18) meaning that he has replaced God’s truth with his own. Because he has formulated an alternate narrative condoning his behavior, he can live without concern or fear of punishment.

Like the sinner who follows the “visions” of his heart through justifying his deviant actions, Iran has created a narrative delegitimizing the State of Israel and denying its very right to exist. Armed with this alternate vision, Iran has unabashedly demonized Israel and taken steps to bring about its destruction.

In an extensive article about Iran’s dictatorial regime in the New Yorker Magazine, Jon Lee Anderson quotes Ali Akbar Javanfekr, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s senior media adviser and the director of IRNA, Iran’s official news agency on Israel. He writes, “When I raised the topic of Israel, he affected a mournful look. ‘Israel is unfortunately doomed,’ he said. ‘I say this without any animosity but as a statement of fact. The rest of the world demands it, and the United States should separate itself, because it can gain nothing from this relationship except more trouble.’” Iran is backing this shocking rhetoric with action, recently unveiling two new offensive military weapons that further advance and expand the Islamic Republic’s capability to attack Israel and the United States. Last week Tehran announced the development of the “ambassador of death” – a new drone that can carry up to four cruise missiles and fly as far as 620 miles, and launched production of new high-speed, missile-launching assault-boats.

Iran uses a constructed narrative of history to justify its ongoing threats to Israel and its relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons in direct contradiction with the will of the international community. By denying both the Holocaust and Israel’s right to exist today, Iran has created a “vision of its heart” that threatens Israel’s safety and security. ■

The Underlying Attitude of Teshuvah

And you shall return to the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 30:2)
ל:ב

ושבת עד ה' אלקיך (דברים

After experiencing the terrible outcomes resulting from sin and painful exile, the Torah promises that we will return to God through repentance. Describing the qualities of a repentant person, Rambam adds that he is someone who should “change his name” (Laws of Repentance 2:4). This seemingly external step is important because it implies a commitment to change. Ramban explains, “It is as if he says, ‘I am different, and I am not the same person who did those things.’” Teshuvah requires an openness to change. It demands that we look at the past, and promise to chart a new path for the future. Moreover, one can only truly change his ways if he is ready to make the concerted effort to

chart that new course, abandoning the direction of the past. Without this true commitment to change, he is destined to repeat his past mistakes.

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, we contemplate changing ourselves spiritually and religiously. The dedication to change and betterment has recently pervaded nationally, as the State of Israel takes steps towards a brighter future, approaching face-to-face talks with the Palestinian Authority—coming to the table with an open attitude and a willingness to make compromises for peace.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently announced the resumption of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) scheduled to begin on September 2, when President Obama hosts both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PA President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House. Netanyahu welcomed the announcement and the transition from proximity negotiations to direct talks—a move he has supported for over a year. “We are coming to the talks with a genuine desire to reach a peace agreement between the two peoples,” Netanyahu said. Further, the Jerusalem Post reported that the State Department emphasized that the direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would begin without preconditions. “The issue of settlements, the issue of the moratorium ... has been a topic of discussion and will be a topic of discussion when the leaders meet with Secretary Clinton on September 2,” said State Department Spokesman Philip Crowley.

Teshuvah requires us to take careful stock of ourselves and be open to change. The State of Israel has declared its willingness to reevaluate and make painful changes, if necessary. To date, the Palestinians have yet to declare that same readiness. If these direct talks have any chance of success, the Palestinian people must join Israel and exhibit the underlying attitude crucial for impacting meaningful change in the Middle East. ■

Simple Solutions

It is not hidden from you (Deuteronomy 30:11)

לֹא נִפְלְאָתָהּ הִיא מִמֶּךָ (דְּבָרִים ל:יא)

Describing the seemingly complicated task of observing the laws of the Torah, Moses states, “For this commandment which I command you today, it is not hidden from you” (30:11). Rather, “The word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it” (30:14). Moses’ explanation seems like an oversimplification. We struggle to follow God’s will. How can Moses, then, claim that it’s so simple? Ibn Ezra explains that in reality, Moses is telling us that we must work from the inside. “The essence of all the commandments is in the heart. Some of them have a remembrance of the mouth to strengthen the heart, and other an action so that he will mention them with his mouth.” If a Jew is dedicated in his heart, then the subsequent actions and words of the commandments truly are simple.

In Arab-Israeli relations, we often find ourselves bogged down by the complicated nature of Middle East politics. Yet, one Israeli businessman is building a foundation for coexistence by asserting that the foundation of peace begins with a very simple principle.

After eight years of planning, Nazareth—the largest Israeli Arab city in the country—is about to become the site of the newest industrial park, funded by billionaire industrialist Stef Wertheimer, the website Israel21c reported. Known as one of Israel’s most socially conscious businessmen, Wertheimer’s deceptively simple recipe for peace is: “Be nice to your neighbors and help them to be successful. If you help them to be successful, you have peace.” Nazareth’s industrial park will house local businesses, as well as provide technical education to the area’s youth. At the groundbreaking ceremony held at Nazareth’s Golden Crown Hotel, project director Shawki Khatib, who is also the head of the National Committee of Arab Mayors said, “The direct meeting between the Jewish and Arab populations can be both an engine and the right infrastructure to create a new future for both Jews and Arabs in the country.”

Moses understood that truly complex issues can often be boiled down to a basic, simple idea. Stef Wertheimer is taking decisive action to demonstrate the same principle about peace between Arabs and Jews: Helping neighbors succeed is the greatest recipe for regional stability. ■

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