

APRIL 7, 2010

Parashat Shemini

Adverse Advice

Vayikchu b'nei Aharon Nadav v'Avihu – “And the sons of Aaron Nadab and Abihu took” (Leviticus 10:1)

While the Torah states that Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were punished for bringing *aish zarah*, “a strange fire,” the Midrash (Torat Kohanim) explains that they were actually punished for their insolence. “[At Sinai] they saw Moses and Aaron walking in front, followed by Aaron's sons and then the nation of Israel. Said Nadab to Abihu, ‘When will these two old men die so that we may lead the congregation?’ to which God responded, ‘Let us see who buries whom?’” This explanation clarifies Nadab's punishment, but why did Abihu suffer the same fate? Abihu died with his brother because in offering the strange fire with Nadab, Abihu indicated that he agreed with Nadab's rejection of the chosen leadership of Moses and Aaron. Thus, by siding with Nadab, Abihu sealed his own fate.

Abihu's punishment reminds us to be wary of taking advice from self-interested parties. Nowadays, the Palestinian Authority (PA) should heed this lesson as other nations advise them on relations with Israel.

While the United States and other members of the international community have encouraged the Palestinian leadership to enter direct talks with Israel to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many Arab states have offered contradicting advice. At the recent Arab League summit, “Syria and Libya teamed up to pressure Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to quit peace talks with Israel and return to violence,” the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reports. While a Palestinian representative rejected the suggestion, the *Ha'aretz* article indicates that Syria and Libya's initiative produced its desired effect: “Arab leaders...failed to reach a consensus on whether the Palestinians should resume stalled talks with Israel.” Such indecision leaves the PA without the critical political cover it needs from the Arab world to enter into direct negotiations with the Jewish state. While Israel has long expressed its desire to meet with the Palestinian leadership for direct talks, and made numerous difficult concessions to demonstrate its sincere desire for peace, the Palestinians have remained intransigent in their position towards negotiations, continually demanding additional preconditions to talks. For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains his offer to meet “any time, any place” to discuss peace with the Palestinians, the moment has come for the PA to ignore the self-serving recommendations of countries such as Libya and Syria. Abihu's death reminds us that following the wrong counsel could have detrimental results. ■

Telling Israel's Story

Vayiktzof al Elazar v'al Itamar – “And he was angry with Elazar and with Itamar” (Leviticus 10:16)

Moses rebuked Aaron's sons Elazar and Itamar for consuming a sacrificial offering. Rather than speak for themselves, Elazar and Itamar allowed their father Aaron to offer a response which ultimately appeased Moses and ended the episode. What happened? The Talmud (Zevachim 101b – also see Rashi 10:18-20) explains that because Elazar and Itamar's brothers had died on that very day, they had the status of *onenim*—mourners—and were not permitted to offer the sacrifices. Therefore, when Moses saw them eating he assumed that they had improperly offered the sacrifices, which if true meant that the offerings would have had to be burned instead of eaten. Aaron explained to Moses that as *Kohen Gadol*, he did not have the status of *onen* so he himself offered the sacrifices—making them

permissible for consumption. Ultimately, Moses was angered by Aaron's sons because he had incomplete information. However, when Aaron shared the facts with his brother, Moses relented and agreed that he was the one who was mistaken.

Too often Israel's detractors repeat Moses' mistake, basing their arguments on a lack of information. As American Jews, we have the ability to change this. If we tell Israel's true story, we can publicize the amazing accomplishments of the Jewish state and ensure that American support for Israel remains strong.

We must tell Israel's story. We must tell our friends and neighbors that Israel's innovative and entrepreneurial culture has produced more high-tech start-ups per capita than any other nation on earth. We must tell them that Israel has moved beyond slogans and developed and deployed real energy alternatives to oil. We must share how Israelis rush to the scenes of natural disasters throughout the world because they believe that to save one life is to save the whole world. That Israel exists as a free and open society, in a region of authoritarian regimes, with democratic elections and judiciary oversight that can—and often does—criticize and reject government activity. We must explain that the Jewish state desperately wants to live in peace with all of its neighbors.

Despite these facts, a lack of contextual understanding leads too many Americans to think of Israel in militaristic terms. We must take it upon ourselves to tell Israel's other story, the story of Israel making the world a better place. For more on Israel's contributions, click [here](#) and scroll down to the "Latest Memos and Articles" section.

A lack of information leads to misunderstandings and unjustified criticism. To combat this, we must share the facts. We must tell Israel's true story, and not allow others to paint a skewed picture of Israel. Otherwise, just as Moses unfairly lashed out Aaron's sons, detractors will continue to unfairly criticize the Jewish state. ■

Focusing on Food

Zot hachaya asher tochlu – “These are the living things which you may eat” (Leviticus 11:2)

Many of the basic laws of *kashrut* appear in our *parashah*. Sefer Hachinuch (commandment 99) explains that in prohibiting certain foods, the Torah acts in our own best interests by protecting us from that which is detrimental to our well-being. “The body is the vessel of the soul within which it functions...When the body has any detriment in any manner, intellectual activity is diminished in an equal amount. For this reason, the complete Torah distanced us from anything detrimental [to the body]...And if there are among them items unknown to our sage doctors, do not wonder, for the Reliable Healer who warned us [not to consume] them is wiser than you and them, and how foolish is the person who thinks that only the things he understands can harm him.”

According to Sefer Hachinuch, the laws of *kashrut* serve our own best interests and underscore that the foods we eat have profound effects on our health. Recent scientific findings, published by an Israeli biologist, reinforce this connection between our diet and our overall health.

Dr. Iris Shai, a researcher in nutrition at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, recently published her findings which indicate that healthy, long-term weight loss diets can significantly reverse carotid (main brain artery) atherosclerosis, and also lower blood pressure in overweight and mildly obese people. “For the first time we have images that prove that a diet can accomplish what we believed could only be done with pills, and you get the same results with a low-carbohydrate or low-fat diet, or the Mediterranean Diet,” Dr. Shai told the website Israel21c. Her study, which was published in *Circulation* (the journal of the American Heart Association), reveals that a healthy long-term diet lowers blood pressure and reverses clogging of the arteries—a major risk factor for stroke and heart attack.

While many of us use medications to regulate our blood pressure and cardiac health, Dr. Shai's research demonstrates that we can achieve similar benefits by adopting a heart-healthy diet. Her research, and the wisdom of the Sefer HaChinuch, reminds us that when it comes to living healthy, we truly are what we eat. ■

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