



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 22, 2010

Parashat Tetzaveh-Zachor

Bearing the Burden of Justice

V'asita choshen mishpat – “and you shall make a breastplate of judgment” (Exodus 28:15)

The Torah describes the vestments that the High Priest wore while performing services in the Temple, including the “breastplate of judgment.” How was the breastplate related to judgment? The Talmud (Zevachim 88b), describing the ritual significance of each of the priestly vestments, states simply that “the [wearing of the] breastplate atoned for sins of [miscarriage of] justice.” Rashi, in his commentary on verse 28:30—“and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord continually”—strengthens this idea by stating: “According to the Midrash Agadah, the breastplate atoned for miscarriages of justice.” By assigning the High Priest a vestment dedicated to atoning for any miscarriages of justice, a special attention is drawn to Judaism’s respect for the rule of law and constant pursuit of justice.

Today, the state of Israel continues to place a special value on justice and the rule of law. As the recent implementation of an Israeli Supreme Court decision demonstrates, in Israel the law reigns supreme.

Soon after Israel completed the segment of its security barrier near the Palestinian village of Bil’in, local residents appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court to move the blockade—claiming that the barrier hindered access to many of their fields. Recently, the Israeli Supreme Court agreed and Israel began rerouting the security barrier away from the village to allow Bil’in’s residents greater access to their agricultural land. While the court issued its initial ruling in 2007, according to Israeli Defense Ministry spokesman Shlomo Dror, “It took time to find the location of the new line in a way that wouldn’t disturb the Palestinians. As soon as we did...we began working.” While construction of the security barrier continues, only about two-thirds of the planned route has been completed. Work on the remaining areas has slowed substantially because of budget cuts and the sharp decrease in Palestinian attacks inside Israel.

Israel’s commitment to uphold the value of justice serves as a model for others to emulate. Like Aaron, the first High Priest to wear the breastplate of justice on his heart, Israel proudly wears the badge of justice. ■

Modern Day Amalek

Timcheh et zecher Amalek – “you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek” (Deuteronomy 25:19)

At first glance the obligation to destroy Amalek seems too severe. While Amalek did attack the Israelites when they were at their weakest, and demonstrated particular malice towards the Israelites, the Jewish nation had no shortage of adversaries. Why then did God reserve this commandment specifically for Amalek? The Midrash (Pesikta Rabati 13) suggests that this commandment foreshadowed the future, “Said God, I will preempt that which [Amalek] intends to perpetrate upon Israel. For it is revealed and known to me how [Haman] will in the future decree [to destroy] ‘both young and old, little children and women, in one day’” (Esther 3:13). Ironically, Haman’s nefarious attempt to annihilate the Jewish people sealed the fate of his own nation as the eternal adversary of the Jewish people, forever associating Amalek with hatred, anti-Semitism and the desire to destroy the Jewish people.

Throughout the generations Judaism has attributed the identity of Amalek not to any one particular nation, but to any nation—from Haman’s Persia to Hitler’s Germany—which demonstrates Amalek’s overwhelming animosity towards

the Jewish people. According to Israel's Prime Minister, the legacy of Amalek is once more rearing its head in the form of an Iranian government which is bent on developing nuclear weapons.

Speaking at Auschwitz on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "We the Jewish people learned the lesson [of the Holocaust] well after we lost one-third of our people. I pledge as prime minister that we will never let the hand of evil harm our people and our state, never again." Netanyahu promised that as the head of the state of Israel he would not allow a "new Amalek" to threaten to destroy the Jewish nation. In this speech, Netanyahu echoed an attitude that he had expressed to David Brooks of *The New York Times* last May. When Brooks asked one of Netanyahu's advisers to gauge the Prime Minister's anxiety about Iran, the aide answered: "Think Amalek."

Netanyahu's comments carry new weight in light of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, released on February 18th, which declared for the first time that the nuclear watchdog had extensive evidence of "past or current undisclosed activities" by Iran's military to develop a nuclear warhead. The report cited new evidence that appeared to paint a picture of a concerted drive in Iran toward a weapons capability. According to *Ha'aretz*, "the IAEA also said that Iran managed to make a minute amount of near 20-percent enriched uranium within days of starting production from lower-enriched material. Higher enrichment puts Iran nearer to the capability of making fissile warhead material, should [Iran] opt to do so." For more information on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

As we read the commandment to remember Amalek's attack, we must also remember the defense that repelled the assault. Now, we must do more than remember. We must take the initiative to ensure that comprehensive sanctions against Iran's energy sector are enacted in order to convince today's Amalek to abandon its nuclear program. ■

Scattered and United

Yeshno am echad mefozar u'meforad – "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed..." (Esther 3:8)

In the winter of 1934, as Jews around the world witnessed the rise of Nazism, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook published a Purim message (see Ma'amarei Harayah, pp 155-157) that included the following: "During this Purim period, in these difficult hours...let us now remember these [ancient] days and their lights as they are recorded before us in the Book of Esther, written with divine inspiration...The eternal declaration, 'Go and gather all of the Jews' (Esther 4:16) must live with us again and exalt us from our degradation. Yet, anyone who says that the evil Haman lied when he said, 'There is one nation, spread and scattered' (3:8) is surely mistaken. This one nation is truly 'spread and scattered,' and despite this—it is one nation. And perhaps you will say, how are these two simultaneous opposites—on one hand one nation, but still spread and scattered—possible? There are wonders in the world. And this nation, whose very existence in this divided world is itself wondrous, also demonstrates through its existence this mysterious fact. For in its very essence it is 'one nation' despite the fact that it is 'scattered and divided.'"

Nowadays, although the Jewish people remain spread and scattered throughout the world, the Jewish people's connection to and support for Israel remains a unifying force.

For nearly 3,000 years the Land of Israel has been at the heart of the Jewish people—the homeland from where our ancient traditions, culture and values have emanated. Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has served as a rallying point and central focus of world Jewry, especially affecting the American Jewish community. Today, we must all take the time to support Israel. It is imperative that we become the people that our members of Congress depend on for information about Israel. We must actively get involved in political campaigns, donate to the candidates of our choice, lobby our elected officials, invite them to speak in our synagogue and make sure they understand the necessity of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. For more on how you can help support the U.S.-Israel relationship, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

In modern times we can take a measure of comfort in the truth which Haman spoke about us so long ago. While we might be spread and scattered, we continue to act as one nation in our support of the Jewish state. ■

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