



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 11, 2010

Parashat Va'eira

A Group Effort

Vayitzaveim el benei Yisrael – “And commanded them regarding the Children of Israel” (Exodus 6:13)

Moses' initial petition to free the Israelites from Egypt only worsened their situation. God reassured Moses that his mission to redeem the Jewish people would ultimately succeed, yet Moses protested: “Behold, the children of Israel have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me...” (6:12). In response, God spoke to both Moses and Aaron and “...commanded them regarding the Children of Israel...to take the Children of Israel out of Egypt” (6:13). What changed? Why would Moses now succeed? The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah Chapter 7) explains that God's command included a critical element, stating that God now “partnered the community leaders with them.” The subsequent verses list the names of each tribe's leaders, indicating that at this point the communal representatives now took critical roles in leading the Israelites out of bondage.

We can learn a critical lesson about advocacy from the inclusion of the communal leaders in the command to free the Israelites. We must internalize the fact that change did not stem solely from Moses and Aaron at the top, but rather from the leadership within the people.

Every American can help shape policy by getting involved in the political process. As Jews, this is not just an opportunity, but a responsibility which can be fulfilled by taking the time to build relationships with our Representatives. Our elected officials are expected to be experts on such a wide range of issues that they must depend on others, including ordinary citizens, to keep them current on all of the matters that fall under their purview. For the Jewish community, it is imperative that we become the people that our Representatives depend on for information about Israel. As a people who have faced persecution throughout the ages, we do not have the luxury of waiting and hoping that members of Congress will appreciate the U.S.-Israel relationship on their own. Rather, we must teach them about the strong bond between the two countries. 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 the U.S.-Israel relationship. For more on how you can affect American policy towards Israel, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

Moses originally failed to convince Pharaoh because he attempted to affect change alone. As the Midrash states, it was only when Moses partnered with the community that events took a turn for the better—and the Exodus from Egypt began in earnest. ■

Ancient Pests

Hineni mashliach becha...et ha'arov – “I will send upon you...the arov” (Exodus 8:17)

Scholars have long debated the exact definition of the term *arov*. What exactly was the fourth plague? Many Passover Haggadahs translate the plague as “mixed multitude,” a term which serves as an accurate translation but offers little insight into the plague itself. Most commentators (including Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra) explain that *arov* were wild and dangerous animals. Yet, German biblical scholar Benno Jacob (in his commentary on Exodus, p. 267) notes that the Torah only records damage to the land from the *arov*. In fact, the Torah offers no record of damage to

property or death from the *arov*—results we would expect from an attack of wild beasts. Jacob presents an alternate interpretation found in the opinion of Rabbi Nehemiah (in Midrash Shachar Tov) who explains that the *arov* were “types of flies and mosquitoes.” According to Jacob, *arov* “affected man when released, until they withdrew—in other words, an insect akin to a winged ant.” Perhaps the most miraculous aspect of *arov* was not the infestation, but rather their departure when “there remained not one” (verse 27).

Jacob’s interpretation of *arov* reminds of us of the damage that insects can inflict on crops. In the modern world, an Israeli company has devised a fresh way to spare our food supplies from such insect infestations.

Israeli company Meteor Agricultural Nets has patented a new type of netting which protects vegetables from insects without the use of harmful chemical pesticides. According to the website Israel21c, the netting’s inventor Avi Klayman “saved Israel’s tomato crop and in the process stumbled onto a multi-million dollar industry that is now creating a green revolution in agriculture.” The invention of the nets began in 1988 when yellow curl virus, a disease carried by whiteflies, devastated much of Israel’s tomato crop. Stopping the whiteflies was very difficult because they quickly build up resistance to pesticides. While seeking to develop a way to protect Israeli crops from the troublesome insects Klayman developed a mesh called the Antivirus Net. This net blocks the whitefly’s physical access to plants yet allows sunshine to reach the plants and enables air circulation. Today, Meteor nets are used in dozens of countries around the world from Latin America to Africa and even countries in the Middle East, such as Jordan and Egypt.

While the *arov* of Egypt caused great consternation, Israeli technology is now helping to ensure that the world’s vegetable supply will be safe even without dangerous pesticides...or divine intervention. ■

Precise Punishment

Vayach barad b’chol eretz Mitzrayim – “And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt” (Exodus 9:25)

Moses warned Pharaoh about the devastating nature of the *barad* before raining the destruction down upon Egypt. In contrast to the previous plagues that had caused temporary suffering to the Egyptians, Moses described the hail as *kol mageifotai*— all my plagues (9:14)—attesting to the harsh nature of the *barad*. S’forno notes that Moses’ admonition served not just as a warning to Pharaoh, but to the Egyptian people “So that [only] he who sins will lose. Therefore I warn you now so that people will not die in the field.” According to the Torah, “He that feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh made his servants and his cattle flee into the houses” (9:20). Thus, whether or not an Egyptian suffered the *barad* depended upon the person’s readiness to recognize God’s will.

Like Moses, who wished to change Egypt’s policy towards the Israelites without punishing innocent citizens, the United States is considering sanctioning Iran—in order to change the Islamic Republic’s nuclear policy—while bringing minimal harm to the Iranian people.

“The United States said...it has begun discussing new sanctions to pressure Iran’s government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to curb Tehran’s nuclear programs without hurting ordinary people,” Reuters reports. According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “We cannot...stand by when the Iranians themselves talk about increasing their production of high enriched uranium...Our goal is to pressure the Iranian government, particularly the Revolutionary Guard elements, without contributing to the suffering of the ordinary [people], who deserve better than what they currently are receiving.” Possible sanctions being considered by the White House include “expanding travel and other restrictions for individuals and institutions with close ties to the leadership and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.” The United States has previously named the Revolutionary Guard as proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and has imposed sanctions on the group’s elite Quds force. For more on Iran, go to www.aipac.org/Iran.

According to the Torah, only those who denied God’s right to free the Jewish nation suffered the powerful consequences of the *barad*. Now, the United States hopes to similarly focus its sanctions on the Iranian leadership which is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and threaten global stability. ■

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