

JULY 19, 2010

Parashat Va'etchanan

Immediate Action

Then Moses separated three cities (Deuteronomy 4:41)

אז יבדיל משה שלש ערים (דברים ד:מא)

Rabbi Simai, in Makkot 10a, asks: “What is the meaning of the verse, ‘He that loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver’? (Ecclesiastes 5:9).” He answers his own question by alluding to our *parashah*, stating that “This refers to our teacher Moses, who knew that the three cities on the east of the Jordan would not [legally] harbor [accidental killers] until the three cities in Canaan were chosen. [Nonetheless] he said, [when] a *mitzvah* comes to my hand, I will fulfill it.” In Mechilta, the rabbis convey a similar idea. Commenting on the verse, “And you shall guard the *matzot*” (Exodus 12:17), they use a play on words to read the verse as: “and you shall guard the *mitzvot*.” This wordplay teaches us that “If a *mitzvah* comes before you, do not let it become *chametz*.” Just as unleavened dough that sits too long becomes *chametz*, one should seize the opportunity to fulfill a *mitzvah* before it disappears.

Nowadays, the United States should follow Moses’ example of acting with urgency by immediately implementing the tough sanctions outlined in the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act.

Congress’ passage of the most comprehensive and toughest Iran sanctions legislation to date will—if implemented promptly and aggressively—dramatically increase the pressure on the Iranian regime to halt its illicit pursuit of nuclear weapons. The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which passed in the Senate by a vote of 99-0 and in the House by 408-8-1, aims to stifle Iran’s energy sector, restrict Tehran’s ability to conduct international financial transactions, and hamper its ability to obtain components for its nuclear and missile programs. Quick implementation and strong enforcement by the president—who signed the bill into law this month—and his administration holds the last best hope of persuading Iran to suspend its quest for nuclear weapons through political, economic, and diplomatic means. For more on how implementing new sanctions can prevent a nuclear Iran, click [here](#).

With the passage of CISADA the President has the opportunity to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program once and for all. But he must act quickly, lest the chance to act, like dough that turns to *chametz*, is lost. ■

Face to Face

The Lord spoke with you face to face (Deuteronomy 5:4)

פנים בפנים דבר ה' עמכם (דברים ה:ד)

Why did Moses emphasize the direct nature of the interaction between God and the people described in our *parashah*? Rashi focuses on the benefits of direct contact over indirect contact: “Said Rabbi Berachia: Thus said Moses, ‘Do not say that I am misleading you about something that is not a matter of fact, such as an agent does acting as a middleman between the buyer and seller; for in this case, the seller Himself is speaking to you.’” Therefore, while Moses realized that the people saw him as a trusted intermediary, he understood that there is no substitution for direct contact.

Moses stressed the importance of direct interaction as a way to establish trust and clear communication. In order to advance peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, this lesson should be used to hasten the resumption of direct negotiations between the parties.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas recently stated that direct negotiations with Israel should not begin until further progress has been made on indirect negotiations. “We have presented our vision and thoughts and said that if progress is made, we will move to direct talks, but that if no progress is made, it [direct negotiations] will be futile,” Abbas said. The comments came shortly after President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated their support for direct talks to begin soon. Obama also praised Netanyahu and Israel for the steps that they have taken in the proximity talks and expressed his desire for direct talks to begin “well before” September. Abbas has consistently refused to meet face-to-face with his Israeli counterpart, instead demanding that preconditions to negotiations be met prior to talks progressing. Meanwhile, U.S. Middle East Envoy George Mitchell returned to the region to urge the Palestinian Authority to begin direct negotiations. For more information on the need for direct negotiations, click [here](#).

Moses realized that no matter how trusted the middleman, nothing can take the place of direct communication to instill confidence and build a lasting relationship. If the Palestinians are serious about peace, they must abandon preconditions and immediately begin direct negotiations on a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ■

Communicating with our Kids

And you shall teach them diligently to your children (Deuteronomy 6:7)

ושננתם לבניך (דברים 6:7)

The famous commandment to convey the value and meaning of the powerful words of the *Shema* to our children demands that we do more than simply “teach” them. The word *leshanen* means to teach through constant repetition. Yet, S’forno adds an additional element to the way we must teach our children, stating that we must “teach through repetition, and also the sharpness of intellectual wonders.” Accordingly, repetition is not enough; we must explain the depth of the words of the *Shema* in order to impress upon our children the unique singularity of the Jewish faith.

S’forno advocated an approach to education that combined passionate parenting with intellectual complexity. Today, we must heed S’forno’s advice. When teaching our children we must emphasize the strong connection we have with the Land of Israel while highlighting the state of Israel’s “intellectual wonders.”

In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Peter Beinart catalogues the startling detachment of American youth from Israel. “The philanthropists wanted to know what Jewish students thought about Israel...[the pollster] found that they mostly didn’t. ‘Six times we have brought Jewish youth together as a group to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel,’ he [the pollster] reported. ‘Six times the topic of Israel did not come up until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish youth used the word they rather than us to describe the situation.’” The article suggests that Jews with a sense and awareness of the Holocaust inherently understand the importance of Israel’s presence in the world. But, today’s Jewish youth, living in an open, welcoming American society which is largely (and thankfully) void of anti-Semitism, do not feel that same sense of urgency. They fail to connect with a Jewish state that does not directly relate to their lives.

One solution lies in S’forno’s advice: we must teach our children about Israel’s “intellectual wonders,” emphasizing Israel’s ethical, moral and technological accomplishments. We must ensure that our children identify with Israel’s struggles as it attempts to balance the pressures of terrorism with freedom and democracy; discuss Israel’s amazing accomplishments in areas of computer technology, agriculture, and bioscience; highlight Israel’s efforts to bring the blessings that it enjoys to the downtrodden across the globe; and explain to our children how the U.S. and Israel share a critical strategic partnership.

Unfortunately, we can not simply assume that our children will inherently acquire our love of, passion for and dedication to the Jewish state. We must teach it to them. S’forno’s message gives us a powerful way to begin the conversation. ■