

DECEMBER 13, 2010

Parashat Vayechi

Standing Tall

And Israel strengthened himself, and sat [up] (Genesis 48:2)

וַיִּתְחַזַּק יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּשֶׁב (בראשית מז:ב)

It seems odd that the Torah would state that Jacob “strengthened himself and sat up” before giving his final blessing to Joseph and his sons. Chizkuni suggests that Jacob changed his stature in order to convey a message of seriousness and vitality: “He strengthened himself to make himself look healthy, for the bequests of the dying can be retracted...and now he wished for his gift (given through his blessing) to be the gift of a healthy man that could not be returned” (see Chizkuni on 48:2). According to one Midrash, Jacob—in an even more dramatic attempt to show his earnestness—did not simply sit straight, but rather “he strengthened himself and stood up” (Pesikta Rabati Chapter 3).

The power of a weak man standing upright creates a beautiful image of perseverance and strength. That image manifests itself today through the paralyzed women and men that an Israeli company is helping to stand up and walk. Through its innovations, countless people could be empowered to see the world, literally, from a new height.

A recent episode of the popular television show Glee “ended with what seemed like a holiday miracle,” *Newsweek* reports. “Artie, a character confined to a wheelchair, took a few halting steps with the help of a machine called the ReWalk. ‘It was invented by some guy in Israel,’ he said, before using the ReWalk and crutches to move across the floor.” Artie was correct; the device was created by Dr. Amit Goffer, CEO of the Israeli company Argo Medical Technologies. According to Dr. Alberto Esquenazi, the Chairman of the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Moss Rehab in Philadelphia, “We’ve seen an improvement in their tolerance to standing and a sense of emotional reward in being able to stand and walk again. In the long term, we suspect that it’s going to be beneficial for bones.” Dr. Goffer, himself confined to a wheelchair, explained in a [video](#) that “The main benefit of the device is dignity—the self esteem of a person. People are not aware of being grown up...being the height of a child. The moment a person shifts from a wheelchair status to a crutch user status, it’s a whole world; it’s a revolution.”

Jacob realized long ago that by standing up he would convey a critical message to his son about the importance of his blessing. The recent work of Argo Medical Technologies is giving paralyzed patients the opportunity to, like Jacob, stand tall and change the way they experience the world around them. ■

Every Single Soldier

And it will retreat on its heel (Genesis 49:19)

וְהָיָה יָגֵד עֶקֶב (בראשית מט:יט)

In his prophetic visions, Jacob spoke of his son Gad and said that “Gad will recruit a regiment and it will retreat on its heel” (Genesis 49:19). Commenting on this verse, Rashi explains that Jacob alluded to the fact that in the future the tribe of Gad would be willing to fight to conquer the Land of Israel even after settling comfortably on the eastern shore of the Jordan (see Numbers chapter 32). What then does he mean when he says that the regiment “will retreat on its heel”? Rashi explains that Jacob miraculously predicted that after the battle every single soldier would turn on his heel and return safely home, “and not one soldier would be missing.”

Jacob etched upon the Jewish consciousness the importance of every single soldier returning home safely. Nowadays, this message strikes a chord in the hearts of Jews the world over as they focus on securing the freedom of Gilad Shalit, who despite Israeli efforts to bolster the Gazan economy remains a captive of Hamas in the coastal strip.

The Jewish state is hard at work to protect the citizens of southern Israel from ongoing missile, mortar and rocket attacks, while simultaneously making efforts to ease the lives of Palestinians. In fact, Israel's Security Cabinet [recently approved](#) measures aimed at expediting increased exports from the Gaza Strip, reducing the burden on the Gazan population under the Hamas terrorist regime. The move comes amidst a banner year for the growing Gazan economy, which enjoyed a 16% expansion and a decrease in unemployment in the first half of 2010, a trend that is expected to continue. Moreover, during the past six months Israel has increased the number of trucks entering Gaza daily via the Kerem Shalom crossing. In addition, 78 projects by international organizations in health, infrastructure, housing and education have been approved. Yet, despite Israel's efforts, terrorist groups in Gaza [continue to fire rockets and mortars at Israel](#), including recently fired 120mm mortar shells which contained white phosphorus.

Underlying the many important statistics though is a human being—a man who has been held by Hamas for more than 1,600 days of his life. Gilad Shalit's story should serve as a daily reminder to us of Jacob's message about the importance of every single soldier and the individuals who are often hidden in statistics. Gilad Shalit is a son, a brother and a friend—and the time has come for Hamas to finally let him return home. ■

What Friends Do

Both chariots and horsemen went up with him (Genesis 50:9) (ייעל עמו גם רכב גם פרשים (בראשית נ:ט))

The Egyptian king sent along a great delegation to accompany Joseph when he brought his father's coffin back to Canaan for burial. According to the Midrash (Pirkei Hayeridot Chapter 1 – see Torah Sheleimah of Rabbi M. Kasher vol. 2 page 1769), this delegation brought the total traveling camp of Joseph to 45,000—an astonishing number of people. Pharaoh did this “to do kindness to Jacob,” also sending bread to be distributed for the hungry along the way. The Midrash points out that God expressed appreciation for the Egyptian's generosity, saying: “You have done an act of kindness with My servant Jacob, and I will give My reward to your children's children.”

Realizing Joseph's hour of need following the death of his father, the king of Egypt extended his hand in kindness and friendship. This past month, as Israel found itself in dire need of help to control a wildfire, many of its friends and neighbors—and especially the people of the United States—stood ready and willing to offer their assistance.

Facing the devastation and destruction from a fire that had burned out of control in Israel's Carmel region, killing 42 Israelis and causing thousands to evacuate their homes, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu classified the fire as an “unprecedented disaster” and asked the international community for help putting out the blaze. Speaking at a White House reception to celebrate the second night of Hanukkah, President Barack Obama pledged immediate American assistance. “The United States is acting to help our Israeli friends respond to the disaster,” said the president. “A short while ago, our ambassador in Tel Aviv...issued a disaster declaration, which has launched an effort across the U.S. government to identify the firefighting assistance we have available and provide it to Israel as quickly as possible.” American assistance ultimately included sending the Evergreen supertanker—the world's largest firefighting airplane—fire retardants, suppressants and 11 firefighting experts. Additionally, eight American firefighting planes were en route to Israel, and a 60-person firefighting team was about to depart from Idaho, when Israel's government told Washington that it no longer needed their assistance as the flames had been controlled.

Just as the king of Egypt had mobilized his nation to bring kindness and support to Joseph, the United States rose to meet the needs of Israel during its most desperate hour—yet another example of the deep friendship between America and the Jewish state. Explaining the willingness of Americans to rush to provide help to Israel, President Obama simply said, “Of course, that's what friends do for each other.” ■