

NOVEMBER 15, 2010

Parashat Vayishlach

Doing Everything We Can

And Jacob sent messengers to Esau (Genesis 32:4) (וישלח יעקב מלאכים אל עשו (בראשית לב:ד))

While we learn that Jacob sent angels (see Rashi, on 32:4, who writes that the messengers were actually celestial angels) to deliver a message of peace to his brother, we never learn whether they successfully relayed their message. In fact, we never hear of any response from Esau. Why then does the Torah tell us that “Jacob sent messengers” at all? Ramban explains that while Jacob’s specific mission may not have succeeded, his efforts serve as a powerful example to his descendants: “[This passage comes] to teach us that he [Jacob] did not trust [only] his own righteousness. Rather, he endeavored to bring about his salvation with all of his ability” (see Ramban’s introduction to Vayishlach, commentary before 32:3). In a broader sense, Jacob understood that the Jewish people could not rely solely on spirituality for their survival. Rather, we must take the initiative to build relationships that will provide protection and prosperity for the Jewish nation.

Today, Jacob’s efforts to extend himself to Esau remind us that we too must understand the incredible need to reach out to those in power—especially when it comes to our steadfast support of Israel.

The recent congressional elections, while representative of a shift of political power, indicate continued and widespread American support for Israel. Congressional support for the U.S.-Israel relationship has always been and will remain overwhelmingly bipartisan, marked by the strong backing of Democrats and Republicans alike. Clearly, this unwavering support ensures the alliance between the United States and Israel will continue to flourish, and it is apparent that the 112th Congress will continue America’s long tradition of demanding a strong, safe and secure Israel. The recent election also provides an important opportunity to create new relationships and establish new bonds between advocates for Israel and freshman members of Congress. These members and their staffs will look for support, guidance and information when confronting the challenging issues of Middle East peace and security. They will look to their supporters and friends for advice and counsel. That need means, very simply, that now is the moment to do our part. Now is the time to reach out to a new member of Congress or a freshman congressional staffer and voice your support for a continued strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

As the United States prepares to welcome scores of new members to the incoming 112th Congress, Jacob’s actions provide a powerful example for us to emulate. Like him, we must do everything in our power to build the relationships that will protect and defend the Jewish state. ■

Justified Concern

And four hundred men with him (Genesis 32:7) (וארבע מאות איש עמו (בראשית לב:ז))

When the messengers returned to Jacob with the report that Esau, along with 400 men, had departed to greet him, Jacob responded with great fear: “Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed” (32:8). What was so upsetting about the 400 men? Why was Jacob so afraid? Ramban suggests that the sheer size of Esau’s entourage gave Jacob cause for concern. “Since [Esau] took with him the large number [of] 400 [men], he feared greatly for his life for he said, ‘He would only take all of these [men] to do battle with me’” (see Ramban on 32:8).

While Esau had displayed no overt signs of aggression towards his brother, the incredible size of his band sowed fear in Jacob's mind. Today, many people in the United States share a similar concern about the immense scale of a proposed arms sale to Saudi Arabia.

The Obama administration recently submitted a plan to Congress providing \$60 billion in advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia, the largest arms sale in U.S. history. While the administration has consulted extensively with Israel, and is working to address Israeli concerns about the weapons and technology included in the sale, Congress has an important constitutional duty to carefully examine the implications of this arms transfer. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-CA) and Ranking Member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) recently circulated a letter that raised some important questions about how the proposed arms sale could impact America's national security interests as well as those of our allies. The letter, signed by 198 members of the House of Representatives, asks the administration to explain how it intends to help preserve Israel's qualitative military edge in the face of this sale. The letter also raises concerns about Saudi policies, including their failure to meet President Obama's requests to normalize relations with Israel and to adequately fund the Palestinian Authority. For more information on the Saudi arms sale, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

Without concrete information about Esau's intentions, Jacob had cause for great concern about his brother's blatant demonstration of his military strength. Today, many U.S. citizens have similar concerns about the proposed arms sale to Saudi Arabia. The Obama administration should fully address these concerns before proceeding with this sale. ■

Impacting Society

And [Jacob] encamped before the city (Genesis 33:18)

וַיַּחַן אֶת פְּנֵי הָעִיר (בראשית לג:יח)

Using a clever play on words, the rabbis in the Talmud found an uplifting message in Genesis 33:18. Instead of reading the word *vayichen* to mean "and he camped," from the verb *lachanot* (to encamp), they instead see the verb as a derivation of the word *chen*, meaning "grace" or "favor." Thus, we learn that Jacob not only encamped before the city, but that he also brought favor to the area. How did Jacob do this? The Talmud explains, "Said Rav: he instituted money for them; Shmuel said: he instituted markets for them; Rabbi Yochanan said: he instituted bathhouses for them" (Shabbat 33b). Through this list we see that Jacob not only built altars in God's name (33:20), but he also appreciated the need to do more—bringing economic and health benefits to the people of his time.

Jacob understood that his mission demanded that he not only bring spirituality to the world, but that he also advance human development and prosperity. Nowadays, the people of Israel follow in the footsteps of their namesake by continuing to bring health and well-being to the citizens of Haiti.

Late in October, the Israel Forum for International Humanitarian Aid (IsraAID) sent a team to Haiti to assist victims of the recent cholera outbreak. According to the website Israel21c, at the last count more than 420 Haitians were infected and 284 had died. Aid workers are scrambling to contain the spread of the disease, which has not occurred in Haiti for generations. IsraAID, a coalition of 17 Israeli and Jewish nongovernmental organizations, is the same group that had Israeli staff on the ground just four days after a tragic earthquake devastated Haiti in January of 2010. Over the 10-month period since the earthquake, IsraAID teams have provided various essential services to the thousands of victims of the disaster, including emergency medical treatment, primary family medical care, medical rehabilitation, informal education, assistance with food production, programs for women's empowerment, safe-space programs for children and psycho-trauma services. The work IsraAID is now doing for Haitians suffering from cholera further demonstrates their dedication to a nation in need.

The power and importance of helping others was evident in Jacob's acts, as he worked selflessly to improve the lives of the people around him. Today, Israelis are following suit, using their medical knowledge and scientific capabilities to help the suffering people of Haiti. ■