

MAY 9, 2011

## Parashat Behar

### Liberty throughout the Lands

And proclaim liberty throughout the land (Leviticus 25:10)

וקראתם דרור בארץ (ויקרא כה:י)

Slavery, considered normative in ancient times, has thankfully been largely relegated to humanity's past. Yet, while Biblical passages permitted slavery, Judaism strongly discouraged permanent slavery and emphasized the value of freedom. As opposed to the ancient Code of Hammurabi (see law 16 [here](#)), which treated the harboring of slaves as a crime punishable by death, Judaism forbade the return of slaves to their masters (see Deuteronomy 23:16). We see an example of the Jewish ideal of freedom in the release of all slaves at the beginning of the Jubilee year, when the Torah commands of every slave owner: "You shall return every man to his possession, and you shall return every man to his family" (25:10). Through this and many other similar laws, the Torah clearly communicates the ideal of freedom and self-determination for every man and woman.

Just as Judaism discourages oppression and values human freedom, the Jewish state upholds the ethics of freedom and self-determination as guiding principles. It is this national ethic that is the linchpin of the special bond between Israel and the United States.

In the founding document declaring the establishment of the state of Israel, whose signing we recently celebrated on Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's founders [wrote](#): "[The State of Israel] will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture." Israel's founders followed the lead of America's framers, who saw liberty as an "unalienable right" endowed by the Creator. Unfortunately, these shared values result in the United States and Israel being targeted by groups and countries who deny the ideal of freedoms, hoping to promote a global vision of radical Islam. Following the killing of Osama bin Laden, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak noted the joint struggle of the two countries, [saying](#) that "We have again seen that the leading democracies of the world have a common struggle against terrorism, which will be decided by a multi-faceted joint effort that is far from over."

The casting of the iconic Liberty Bell in Philadelphia with the words of our *parashah*, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," publicly pronounced America's adoption of the Biblical principle of freedom as a core national value. Israel has always remained faithful to this principle in its commitment to democracy, the rule of law, freedom of religion and speech, and human rights. The shared values of these two allies form the basis for the deeply held commitment to stand by one another as they face the challenges ahead. ■

### Hurtful Speech

And you shall not wrong one another (Leviticus 25:17)

ולא תונו איש את עמיתו (ויקרא כה:יז)

The Talmud (Baba Metzia 58b) interprets the phrase, "And you shall not wrong one another," to forbid engaging in harmful speech. Among the different forms of hurtful speech prohibited by this commandment, the Torah forbids us from verbally pouring salt on the wounds of the suffering. The Talmud explains, "If [one's friend] suffers from afflictions or he suffered from sickness or he buried his children, he should not speak to him the way Job's friends

spoke saying, ‘Remember please, who ever perished innocent? Where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, they that plow iniquity and sow mischief, reap the same.’” In other words, when one endures pain and suffering, another may not say, “You had it coming to you!” The Chinuch (Commandment 341) explains that this type of speech is prohibited, “In order to bring peace between people, and peace is great for through it blessing comes to the world.”

Sadly, following the killing of Osama bin Laden, Hamas ignored this simple principle of not speaking in a manner that inflicts suffering on others by condemning the United States for killing a man they described as “a holy warrior.”

After the United States had successfully hunted down Osama bin Laden, the Islamist terrorist group Hamas condemned the United States for the killing, saluting the terrorist mastermind and expressing hope that God will have mercy upon him. “If the news is true, then we consider it a continuation of the American policy based on oppression and bloodshed against Arabs and Muslims,” Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh told reporters in Gaza. He added: “We condemn any killing of a holy warrior or of a Muslim and Arab person and we ask God to bestow his mercy upon him.” [Responding](#) to the comments, State Department Acting Deputy Spokesman Mark Toner called Haniyeh’s remarks on bin Laden “outrageous. It goes without saying bin Laden was a murderer and terrorist...He ordered the killings of thousands of innocent men, women and children... many of whom were Muslim. He did not die a martyr. He died hiding in a mansion, or a compound, far away from the violence that was carried out in his name.” For more on the Hamas condemnation of America for killing bin Laden, click [here](#).

By extolling the virtues of a mass murderer, Hamas has again demonstrated its support for the pain Americans have suffered throughout the years. Instead of using its words to foster peace, as the Talmud would prescribe, Hamas once again revealed its true colors, using painful and hurtful speech to promote violence and murder. ■

## Supporting the Disadvantaged

**Then you shall uphold him (Leviticus 25:35)**

**(וְהִחֲזַקְתָּ בּוֹ (וַיִּקְרָא כַּהֲלֵה)**

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Describing the obligation to help a person in need, the Torah commands us to “uphold” him. Rashi explains that this intriguing phrasing implies that we must help the needy before they fall, after which it would require far more energy and effort to lift them up again. “To what can this be compared? It can be compared to a burden on a donkey for when the load is still on the animal, one person can grab the load [before it falls] and uphold it. By contrast, if the load falls to the ground, [even] five people [are insufficient] to raise it.”

The Torah teaches us that truly effective kindness begins not after a person needs help, but in preventive action aimed at ensuring that the needy remain standing. Today, an Israeli company has put this ethic into action by creating jobs that help mentally and physically disabled people to live more independent lifestyles.

Around the world, up to 90 percent of severely disabled adults face chronic unemployment. But Israeli psychologist Gil Winch realized that these disabled persons were most limited not by their mental or physical confines, the website [Israel21c](#) reported, but that “The biggest problem is when society shuns you and hasn’t given you a place for the past 20 years,” he says. “That does amazing things to your sense of self-worth and your self-esteem and self-confidence.” Winch founded Call Yachol, a for-profit company that provides jobs specifically for disabled Jewish and Arab adults. Call Yachol (which implies both “able to call” and “able to do anything”) employs 180 people with mental and physical disabilities. Winch implemented a parent-based management model where workers are given affection and have scheduled time for team fun. His innovative and unusual business, unparalleled anywhere in the world, has garnered global interest from people looking to replicate this unique Israeli model.

In teaching us to uphold the needy, the Torah reminds us that the best way to help a person is by acting to prevent him or her from requiring assistance in the first place. Call Yachol’s creative employment model fulfills this ethic by providing the disabled with the ability to thrive in mainstream society—a great example of being proactive for the good of the needy. ■