

OCTOBER 17, 2011

Shemini Atzeret & Parashat Bereishit

Celebrating the Good

On the eighth day he sent the people away (Kings I 8:66) ביום השמיני שלח את העם (מלכים א ה:סו)

The *haftarah* read on Shemini Atzeret chronicles King Solomon's words at the dedication of the First Temple, where he offered praise to God, prayed for blessings for the people, and celebrated the accomplishments that the nation had achieved. The text relates that the fourteen day celebration finally ended when, "On the eighth day he sent the people away...they went to their homes joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had shown..." This comment begs the question, if the celebration was said to have lasted fourteen days, how could the people have been sent home on the eighth day? Radak (on 8:65) explains that the "eighth day" actually refers to Shemini Atzeret, "for on that day they received permission from [the king] to leave, and only departed on the day after the holiday."

As evidenced by Solomon's words, in ancient times Shemini Atzeret served as the culmination of national celebration for past blessings. While we often focus on the numerous challenges faced by Israel, today, Shemini Atzeret also represents an important opportunity for us to highlight the Jewish state's impressive achievements.

When Daniel Shechtman became the 10th Israeli to win the Nobel Prize, many Israelis felt a deep sense of pride both in Shechtman and in the state of Israel. For so many Israelis, Shechtman's honor symbolizes the ongoing success story that is the Jewish state. Despite its hostile neighbors, vast desert terrain and unique demographic make-up, Israel has overcome countless obstacles and emerged as a light unto the nations. Israel is now a member of the exclusive Organization for Economic Cooperation (OECD), and has hundreds of companies listed on stock exchanges around the world. In fact, in proportion to its population, Israel has the largest number of startup companies of any nation, as well as the largest number of biotech startups. The Jewish state also has the highest average living standards in the Middle East and, relative to its population, is the largest immigrant-absorbing nation on earth. Israel's expertise, technology, humanitarian assistance and defense strategies are utilized by countries on every continent and remind us of the incredible strength and impact of one small country. To learn more about Israel's achievements, click [here](#).

Historically, Shemini Atzeret served as a day of thanksgiving and celebration, focusing on the blessings of Jewish national achievement. The modern state of Israel, with its numerous accomplishments over her very short history, once again gives Jews around the world a great deal to celebrate. ■

Gilad's Return Home

This is the day which the Lord has made (Psalms 118:24) זה היום עשה ה' (תהלים קיח:כד)

The words of Hallel that are traditionally recited each day throughout the holidays of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret offer praise to God for the salvation and prosperity of the Jewish people. Yet, a careful reading of the powerfully poetic words of the prayer (primarily Psalms, chapters 113-118) reveals a far more nuanced picture, mixing the joy of salvation with the anguish of Jewish suffering. In the very same chapter that the author calls out to "Give thanks to the Lord, who is good, and whose mercy endures forever" (118:1) we also read that the nations "surround me like bees; they are quenched as the fire of thorns" (118:12). Thus, even as we praise God during the days of salvation, we never lose sight of the pain from which we were delivered and the ongoing dangers that we face. While we proclaim, "This

is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it,” (118:24) in the very next verse we call out in prayer, “We beseech you, O’ Lord, save us now!” (118:25).

The Hallel prayer expresses our feelings of gratitude to God for our deliverance from suffering, while simultaneously reminding us of the trials we still face each day. As Jews around the world celebrate the expected release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, the prayer’s mix of joy and anxiety perfectly captures the dichotomy of our emotions, as we simultaneously give thanks and worry about the future.

Israel and the Islamist terrorist group Hamas announced on Tuesday, October 11th that they had agreed on an exchange, “that would free at least 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in return for Staff Sgt. Gilad Shalit,” [The Washington Post](#) reported. Yet, the obvious joy at the imminent return of Shalit, a powerful demonstration of the Jewish ethic of redeeming captives, is a reminder of the threats that Israel still faces. According to [Yediot Achronot](#), “The deal will see Israel release 1,027 security prisoners, including hundreds who were directly involved in murderous terror attacks that claimed hundreds of Israeli lives.” In his [remarks](#) presenting the agreement to the Cabinet for approval, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that “There is an inbuilt tension between the desire to bring back an abducted soldier, or citizen, and the need to maintain the security of the citizens of Israel.” Commenting on the security implications of releasing hundreds of convicted terrorists, Home Front Defense Minister Matan Vilnai said, “This was a very difficult decision, but we have a profound commitment to ensure the return of any abducted soldier. I have faith in the IDF...that they would be able to deal with the implications on the ground.”

Like the words of the Hallel prayer, in the same breath as we celebrate Gilad’s return home after more than five years in captivity and give thanks for his safety, we cannot help but recognize the sober realities inherent in the deal. ■

The Choice (Parashat Bereishit)

And Cain was very angry (Genesis 4:5)

וַיֵּזֶר לְקַיִן מְאֹד (בראשית ד:ה)

According to the Torah, when God accepted Abel’s sacrifice, Cain’s anger seemed poised to overtake him. God confronted Cain over his fury and warned him, “Surely, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin rests at the door” (4:7). What is the meaning of this cryptic final phrase? While many commentators see the verse as a description of the powerful enticement of sin (see Kli Yakkar, S’forno and others), Rashi, in his commentary to the Talmud (on Kiddushin 61b) sees the admonishment as a simple warning that should Cain choose violence, “calamities are ready to arrive.” According to this view, God warned Cain that choosing violence and murder would bring the inevitable repercussions of pain and suffering in return.

As Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas continues to defy President Obama’s calls to resume peace negotiations, he should remember Cain’s choice to turn away from responsible action that would have led to peace.

On September 23, the Middle East Quartet—which includes the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia—issued a statement calling on Israel and the Palestinians to resume direct negotiations “without delay or preconditions.” Israel accepted the Quartet’s call: “Israel welcomes the Quartet’s call for direct negotiations between the parties without preconditions,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a [statement](#). However, the Palestinians have refused to return to the negotiating table, instead condemning Israel for refusing to meet Palestinian preconditions. The PA’s recent application for U.N. membership and its refusal to talk with Israel violate commitments made in the Oslo peace agreements, which require that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict be resolved through direct negotiations between the two parties. The United States and international community should continue to press Abbas to return to talks with a willing Israel and must signal that there will be significant consequences for his continued refusal to negotiate. For more on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, click [here](#).

Just as God warned Cain, there is a proper way for peaceful people to behave. If the PA is serious about peace, they should heed this lesson and immediately return to the negotiating table without preconditions. ■

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