

JANUARY 3, 2011

Parashat Bo

Desperation Households

How long shall this man be a snare unto us? (Exodus 10:7) עַד מַתִּי יִהְיֶה זֶה לְנוֹ לְמוֹקֵשׁ (שְׁמוֹת י:ז)

After Moses threatened Pharaoh with the plague of locusts, we read that Moses “turned and went out from Pharaoh” (10:6). The text immediately continues to state that Pharaoh’s servants begged the Egyptian king to “Let the men go that they may serve the Lord their God,” asking: “Do you not know that Egypt is destroyed?” In his commentary on the text, Rabbi Moses Alshich notes that according to the verse, while Moses had turned away from Pharaoh he had not yet left the room completely. Nevertheless, “[Pharaoh’s] servants were so hurried in the matter...that they could not contain themselves until Moses left [both] the Pharaoh and his servants.”

Imperiled by the looming plague, the urgency of Pharaoh’s servants was so great that they could not even wait for Moses to leave the room before they begged their leader to change his mind, relent and avoid a national calamity. Now, as more countries join in international efforts to economically isolate the Islamic Republic, the people of Iran must also express themselves and demand that their leadership abandon its reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons.

India is increasing the economic pressure on Iran by banning Indian companies from financing oil deals through the Asian Clearing Union (ACU), [The Wall Street Journal](#) reports. “This is a significant action” said U.S. Treasury official Stuart Levey. Iran’s trade through the clearinghouse rose to \$12.2 billion in the first 11 months of this year. And, of the more than \$900 million owed Tehran through the ACU in November, nearly \$800 million comes from India. The Islamic Republic has advertised the clearinghouse to Iranian and Indian firms as a way to “sidestep the U.S. banking system altogether.” The U.S. Treasury has raised the issue with India for more than a year and those conversations accelerated after President Barack Obama’s visit to India in early November. Meanwhile, the Iranian government’s recent removal of decades-old subsidies for food and energy has spurred price increases on everything from fruit and vegetables to gasoline, generated work stoppages, emboldened the political opposition, and begun to seed resentment among Iran’s population. [The Washington Post](#) reports that, “Iranians are reeling from drastic government-ordered price increases for staples such as fuel and bread amid signs of growing frustration and anger.”

Faced with the prospect of another devastating plague, Pharaoh’s servants unsuccessfully begged him to change course. As the Iranian people continue to feel the effects of crippling international sanctions, and as more countries join the international efforts to isolate Iran, the Iranian people must make it clear that they will not follow in the footsteps of Egypt. Instead of allowing their leaders to ruin their national economy, Iranians must demand that their government abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons. ■

The Obligations of Freedom

And there was a thick darkness (Exodus 10:22) וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ אֲפֵלָה (שְׁמוֹת י:כב)

Rashi (on 10:22) recounts the well-known Midrashic explanation that God brought a plague of darkness because “There were among Israel of that generation wicked people who did not wish to leave, and they perished during the three days of darkness.” Rabbi Ben Zion Firrer, (see “Hegyonah Shel Torah, vol. 2 page 52) wonders why Rashi described those who wished to remain in Egypt as wicked, and explains that it was because freedom is an obligation:

“For being a free person is both a merit, but also an obligation...One does not have the right to give up his freedom. The freedom of an Israelite carries holiness inside it, and one is forbidden from sabotaging his own freedom.”

Like the Israelites, whose freedom from Egypt carried the obligation to bring holiness to the world, we in America must view our liberty not only as a gift, but as a responsibility. As such, we must exercise our democratic rights and express ourselves in the political arena.

In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln explained that the founding fathers established the United States to be a country “by the people, for the people.” Lincoln was speaking of the sacrifices of those who gave their lives to defend America’s founding ideals, and emphasized the sense of duty that accompanies the blessings of freedom. While we may sometimes take it for granted, a government can only truly be “for the people” when its citizens express their will to their elected officials.

This month, the 112th Congress convened with 96 first-time members, one of the largest freshman classes in U.S. history. When the time comes for these newly elected representatives to address American security aid for Israel, how will they vote? Who will work to make sure that they, along with more senior returning members of Congress, will continue to support the U.S.-Israel relationship? In this new year the answer must be us. Our congregation must make a commitment to building or strengthening relationships with our elected officials. As individuals and as a community we must educate ourselves about the issues, we must invite our members of Congress to address us as a community, we must encourage freshman representatives to visit Israel and we must stay on top of the pro-Israel legislative agenda. For more on how you can make a difference, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

The Exodus from Egypt not only brought the Jewish people freedom, but also the obligation to share holiness with the world. As proud citizens of the United States who appreciate the great freedom to express ourselves, we must see pro-Israel advocacy in this same way—not just as a right, but as an obligation of the freedom we cherish. ■

A Good Day

On the selfsame day (Exodus 12:41)

בעצם היום הזה (שמות יב:מא)

Describing the actual day of the Exodus, the Torah tells us that on “the selfsame day, all the host of the Lord went out from the Land of Egypt.” Commentators wonder why the Torah describes the day as “selfsame”; what was it the same as? Rashi (on 12:41) explains that the date of the Exodus was no ordinary day on the Jewish calendar, but rather a day that carried special significance throughout history: “On the 15th of Nissan the angels came to Abraham to visit him; on the 15th of Nissan Isaac was born; and on the 15th of Nissan Abraham made the covenant of the parts.”

The interesting language of the Torah highlights the different ways that a single day impacted the Israelites throughout biblical times. As was recently the case in Israel, a single day of significant achievements is still possible even in today’s world.

On December 29th, 2010 the CEO of Noble Energy—one of the companies exploring a major natural gas find off of Israel’s northern coast—reported that the find was “easily the largest exploration discovery in our history.” The company’s president and COO said that “This discovery has the potential to position Israel as a natural gas exporting nation,” the *Jerusalem Post* reports. Analysts appraised the value of the natural gas field at as much as \$45 billion. Later on, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke of the many other significant events that had occurred on that same day: “On a day we are informed of gas finds, on a day we will shortly pass a second biennial budget, on a day one learns that Israel’s economy has grown the most out of any other economy in the Western world and created more than 100,000 work places for Israelis—that is a good day for Israel.”

Too often, we find ourselves disproportionately focusing on the negative news from Israel. This Shabbat, as we read about the great day which brought the Jewish people out of bondage, let us give thanks for the blessings that the Jewish state enjoys, and take note that Israel recently enjoyed a very good day. ■

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