

FEBRUARY 14, 2011

Parashat Ki Tisa

The Best Sign

For it is a sign (Exodus 31:13)

כי אות היא (שמות לא:יג)

Why are *tefillin* worn during the week but not on Shabbat? The Talmud (Menachot 36b) explains that because both *tefillin* (see Exodus 13:16) and Shabbat are described as signs, it is not necessary to don the sign of *tefillin* on a day that is itself a sign. While the symbolism of *tefillin* is apparent, how does Shabbat represent a sign “between [God] and the Jewish people forever” (31:13)? According to Rashbam, when we emulate God by observing Shabbat, our actions represent our inner desire to identify with the Almighty. Therefore, Rashbam explains, God recognized the symbolism of Shabbat, “For you rest like Me because you are with Me.”

Our desire to emulate God and rest on the seventh day represents the greatest possible sign of closeness between God and the Jewish people. Today, especially in light of the unrest in the Middle East, Israel’s dedication to American values represents the greatest sign of Israel’s continued close friendship with the United States.

The resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has left many people worried about the direction that a new Egyptian government will take. At the same time, the situation also inspires hope: the hope that Egypt will embrace democracy, respect freedom and reject radicalism. In addition, there is also the hope that any new Egyptian government will continue the country’s pro-American and pro-Western orientation. It is because of these hopes, and the reciprocal fears, that the U.S.-Israel friendship has never been so critical. Israel—a thriving democracy and a global leader in the areas of technology, agriculture and medicine—is an island of stability in a volatile and important region. For decades, the United States and Israel have shared a deep strategic relationship, and Israel remains America’s most reliable Middle Eastern ally, supporting America’s regional and global policy objectives. For more on the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership, visit <http://www.aipac.org/StrategicPartner>.

In explaining the Israelites’ desire to identify with God, Rashbam reminds us that it is the Jewish state’s emulation of American values that makes the U.S.-Israel relationship so strong. It is these principles, such as freedom and democracy, which represent the greatest sign of friendship between the United States and Israel. ■

When the Going Gets Tough...

That You took out of Egypt (Exodus 32:11)

אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים (שמות לב:יא)

The Torah tells us that in his attempt to save the nation from destruction following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses asked God, “Lord, why does Your wrath wax hot against your people, that You have brought out of the Land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” (32:11). Why did Moses emphasize God’s special effort to save the nation, a fact which would seem to exacerbate the severity of their sin? Nechama Leibowitz (New Studies in Shemot p. 572) explains that “Moses was...appealing to [God’s] mercy. Their stay in Egypt was cited...as an example of God’s kindness to them, which would come to nothing were they now to cease to be a people.” In essence, Moses argued that following the great effort of freeing the people, God must now stay the course in order to ensure that this divine kindness did not go to waste.

Moses successfully argued that God must continue to support and sustain the Jewish people even in the face of adversity. Nowadays, as the United States faces difficult fiscal choices, we too must follow Moses' sage advice by staying the course in our commitment to Israel's safety and security.

Former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates joined the chorus of calls encouraging the United States to continue its economic and military support of Israel, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. Speaking at the annual tribute dinner of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, a bipartisan group of policymakers, business groups and non-governmental organizations dedicated to enhancing America's use of soft power, Gates said that "Right now, the tough choice is to maintain foreign assistance, not to cut it. Right now, the bold act of leadership is to defend spending on key international programs, not to attack it." Congresswoman Nita Lowey (D-NY), ranking member of the Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations was also recently quoted saying that "A stable and secure Israel is in our national security interest and has been a staple of our foreign policy for more than sixty years. Using our budget deficit as a reason to abandon Israel is inexcusable." For more information on U.S. aid to Israel, click [here](#).

Moses rightly argued that when the going got tough, God needed to stay the course and sustain the Jewish people. As America grapples with a growing national deficit, we too must maintain our commitments to support the Jewish state in order to ensure that America's sound investment in Israel's security and stability continues. ■

Our Greatest Trait

For it is a stiff-necked nation (Exodus 34:9)

כי עם קשה עורף הוא (שמות לד:ט)

God criticized the Israelites' stubbornness multiple times in our *parashah*, referring to them as a "stiff-necked" people. First, God threatened to destroy the people who are "stiff-necked" (see 32:9). Then, on two occasions God expressed the intention to separate from the "stiff-necked nation" (33:3 and 33:5). Interestingly, Moses used this same phrase to beg God to return to the Israelite camp: "walk in our midst for it is a stiff-necked nation" (34:9). Why did Moses invoke this seemingly negative phrase? Ramban (on 34:9) explains that the limitations of obstinacy can also be a sign of strength when read in a positive light. In this way, we see that despite the Israelites' original inflexibility, when the people repented it was in fact that same perseverance that prevented God from disengaging from the nation.

As Jews dedicated to the strength and security of the Jewish state, we find ourselves called on to repeatedly lobby our elected officials to stand behind Israel. While at times we might feel like a "stiff-necked" people, commitment and focus are critical to ensure that our representatives hear our message.

Because we believe in strong American support for Israel, we must understand the critical importance of conveying this message to our elected officials, whether by building a relationship with our members of Congress, picking up the phone, writing a letter or sending an email. Yet, with the Middle East in the news on a regular basis and Israel finding itself increasingly isolated, at times it can seem repetitive and unnecessary to continue to express our support for Israel day after day. However, the exact opposite is true. Our representatives want and need to hear from us on a range of issues related to Israel. They need to know that their constituents recognize and appreciate their unwavering support of Israel, whether it involves signing a letter to the President regarding a crucial United Nations vote, continued foreign aid, or the need to increase American pressure on Iran's illicit nuclear program. Now more than ever, with unrest and instability spreading across the Middle East at a frightening pace, our continued communications take on an added importance. To learn more about how you can make a difference, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

While being stiff-necked was a factor in the sin of the Golden Calf, ironically, it was also a critical element of the Israelites' redemption. Right now we must invoke this national characteristic to protect the Jewish state. Our steadfast determination in communicating the value of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship is not just important, it is our greatest strength. ■