

JULY 18, 2011

## Parashat Matot

### Keeping Our Commitments

He shall not break his word (Numbers 30:3)

לא יחל דברו (במדבר ל:ג)

Describing the commandment to keep our promises, Moses uses an interesting word to describe the act of not living up to one's word, telling us that the oath taker may not *yachel* (break) his or her vow. Rashi explains Moses' wording to be a form of *lo yechalel*—meaning “he should not desecrate his words” and profane his speech by violating his oath. Rabbi Yosef Gabai, in his work *Bigdei Shesh* (on Parashat Matot), understands the word *yachel* to mean “to hope and desire. This means that he should not delay fulfilling his oath. Rather, ‘everything that emanates from his mouth he should do (30:3),’ without any delay.” Thus we learn that when we make commitments or promises, instead of putting them off or hoping they happen eventually, we must take action to ensure that we make good on our vows.

Just as one who takes a vow must act swiftly to fulfill his or her commitments, the U.S. must hold true to her promise by continuing to implement economic sanctions against companies doing business with Iran.

Last July, President Obama signed into law the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (CISADA)—the toughest Iran sanctions legislation to date. Since that time, Iran has engaged in a clandestine campaign to circumvent these sanctions, flouting the will of the international community. [Agence France-Presse](#) recently reported that Western nations “accused Iran of carrying out ‘alarming’ breaches of U.N. nuclear sanctions, often with Syria’s aid...They involve increasingly complex methods: the use of front companies, assumed names, using multiple financial intermediaries and currency exchange offices, physically hiding things, false statements and forgery,” the French envoy said.” In light of the fact that numerous companies continue to do business with Iran in violation of the CISADA sanctions, Congress should press the Obama administration to implement and stringently enforce the law. For more information on Iran, go to [www.aipac.org/Iran](http://www.aipac.org/Iran).

Tougher enforcement will bring the sting of CISADA into greater focus in Iran and will encourage the Iranian regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Like the vows we take, which demand action and fulfillment, the Obama administration must take prompt action to further enforce U.S. sanctions laws against Iran. ■

### The Weight of our Words

He shall do according to all that exits his mouth (Numbers 30:3)

כלל היוצא מפיו יעשה (במדבר ל:ג)

While the simple meaning of the phrase, “He shall do according to all that exits his mouth,” expresses the requirement for a person to fulfill his or her oaths, the Kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Vital (see *Ma’ayan Hashavua*, *Bamidbar* p. 613) offered an alternative interpretation. According to Rabbi Vital, this verse teaches us that we must be extremely careful about what we say because, “All that exits ones mouth”—*yaaseh*—“will be done.” Rabbi Vital explains, “Every speech has an effect above [in heaven], for good or bad. When one speaks words of holiness, he awakens spiritual worlds to influence the world positively and in purity. And one who speaks slanderously and wickedly awakens the negative [spiritual] forces, God forbid!” On a fundamental level, our speech impacts the way we think and act. If we speak words of peace and mutual understanding, we will create peaceful interaction and

understanding. Conversely, speech that is full of hatred and animosity will lead to actions rooted in hatred.

The Torah reminds us of the true power of our words, and how the way we speak strongly affects how we will act as well. That is why we must be wary when the Palestinian Authority (PA) speaks of reconciliation with a terrorist organization dedicated to Israel's destruction.

Congressional Republicans and Democrats warned that American aid to the Palestinians is in jeopardy over continued Palestinian intransigence and the recent deal between the PA and the terrorist group Hamas, [The Associated Press](#) reported. The House hearing on this matter comes on the heels of House and Senate resolutions calling on the Obama administration to consider suspending aid to the PA in light of its agreement with Hamas. "As a matter of both law and basic decency, we will never do business with or provide aid to a government controlled by or reporting to terrorists," said Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY). Given the Palestinians' unwillingness to restart negotiations with Israel and continued efforts to unilaterally declare statehood at the United Nations despite U.S. resistance, members of Congress questioned whether U.S. aid—some \$550 million requested this year—was providing Washington leverage with the Palestinians. "The Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act requires the Palestinian Authority to stop incitement and recognize the Jewish state of Israel's right to exist if it wants to keep receiving U.S. assistance. Given the Palestinian Authority's record and given U.S. law, how can we justify continued assistance?" Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH) asked. For more on how the Palestinian unity deal undermines peace prospects, click [here](#).

By expressing the true weight and power that words can have, the Torah shows how our words directly impact our actions. With this knowledge in mind, America should reassess its financial support for the PA if it continues down the dangerous path it now follows, one driven by violent rhetoric and frightening reconciliations. ■

## Destructive Leadership

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### **Moses was angry with the officers of the host (Numbers 31:14) (ויקצף משה על פקודי החיל (במדבר לא:יד))**

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The power of leadership is a recurring theme throughout Parashat Matot. Commenting on the fact that Moses specifically shared the rules of fulfilling oaths to the "heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel" (30:2), the Midrash (Midrash Hagadol) comments, "Some leaders bring the people of their generation to good, and some undermine the people of their generation with wickedness." Later, when the army returned victorious from battle with improper spoils of war, Moses expressed his anger specifically at the "officers of the host" (31:14), prompting Rashi (on 31:14) to comment, "This teaches us that all of the transgressions of a generation fall upon its leaders..."

Our *parashah* highlights the tendency of leadership to be either a force for good or destruction. Today, the world has become witness to the destructive powers of negative leadership as we watch the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad violently repress Syrian citizens' legitimate desire for democratic reform.

For decades, Syria has been a center of instability in the Middle East. Amidst the Arab Spring, Syrians began to protest peacefully against their government, hoping for democratic reforms. The Assad regime, by contrast, responded with brutal violence and repression. According to [Agence France-Presse](#), since the protests began several months ago, activists have reported that Syrian security forces have killed over 1,300 and arrested at least 12,000. Following the recent attacks on the U.S. and French embassies in Damascus, the Obama administration blasted the Syrian regime in the strongest language to date, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported. "President Assad is not indispensable and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated. "From our perspective, he has lost legitimacy."

The Torah teaches us that leaders have the unique opportunity to use their power to inspire their people to greatness or lead them down a path of wickedness. Sadly, both through its command of the army and its efforts to encourage Syrian citizens to lash out against American interests, the Syrian regime truly represents one of the most dangerous, destructive models of leadership that the world must grapple with today. ■

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