

MAY 30, 2011

Parashat Naso

Turning Towards God in Kindness

May God lift His countenance upon you (Numbers 6:26)

ישא ה' פניו אליך (במדבר ו:כו)

Ibn Ezra explains that the cryptic language in verse 26 means that whenever we turn to God, God will be “looking” to us. But, how does one turn to God? While Rambam offers the explanation that we do so through prayer and following the Torah, he also emphasizes the importance of emulating God’s attributes: “Our Sages taught [the following] explanation of this *mitzvah*: Just as God is called ‘gracious,’ you shall be gracious; Just as God is called ‘merciful,’ you shall be merciful” (See Rambam, Laws of Attitudes, 1:6). Therefore, by emulating God’s kindness and caring, we turn ourselves towards God.

Rambam recognized that in order to merit God’s blessings, we must emulate the divine attributes of mercy and compassion. Today, one of the ways that the state of Israel lives up to this ideal is by keeping its doors permanently open to children sickened by radiation from the nuclear accident in Chernobyl.

While the nuclear disaster in Japan has grabbed recent headlines, people living in the region of the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine continue to suffer, despite the fact that the nuclear accident there occurred more than 25 years ago. Israel, the only country that permanently opens its arms to children sick from radiation caused by the Ukrainian nuclear disaster, recently accepted 25 more children from the region as part of Chabad’s Children of Chernobyl’s 93rd rescue mission, the website Israel21c.org reported. The fallout from the meltdown, which directly led to the deaths of about 100,000 people, continues to pose grave health risks, particularly to children who have a high rate of thyroid disease, birth defects, heart conditions and compromised immunity as a result of exposure to lingering radiation in the air, water and soil. “Israel is the only country that will accept the children on a permanent basis,” explains Rachel Fertel, special events coordinator for Chabad’s Children of Chernobyl. “Others take them out of Chernobyl [for treatment] but bring them back after a few weeks. We don’t want them back in contaminated areas ever again.”

Judaism teaches us to imitate God by acting with kindness and compassion to others. Today, the Jewish state’s willingness to welcome children suffering from a nuclear accident demonstrates another way in which the people of Israel are doing just that. ■

Actions for Peace

And [God] should give you peace (Numbers 6:26)

וישם לך שלום (במדבר ו:כו)

In their blessing to the nation, the priests concluded by praying for God to give peace to the Israelites. What kind of peace did they pray for? The Midrash (Midrash Agadah) explains that it was a complete peace, when “even your adversaries become whole with [Israel],” including “peace from wars.” How is such a wonderful peace achieved? Ba’al Haturim states that we must be proactive, noting that the *gematria* of *shalom* equals the *gematria* of the word “*asu*” (you shall do). He also quotes the maxim of the Mishnah, in Avot 4:15, which advises us to “Initiate peace with every person.” Put simply, praying for peace is not enough, we must also take action to bring it about.

The conclusion of the priestly blessing underscores the importance that Jewish tradition places on taking action to achieve peace—a value that the Jewish state has long followed in both word and deed. Unfortunately, by reconciling with Hamas, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has demonstrated that peace is not its primary concern.

Even before the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Jewish community in then-British Mandate Palestine expressed its desire to live in peace with its neighbors. Since its founding, Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to make bold, painful concessions such as withdrawing from land and forcibly removing its citizens in order to reach peace. Today, the only way to achieve that goal with the Palestinians is through direct negotiations. Yet, rather than talk with Israel, PA President Mahmoud Abbas has elected to reconcile with Hamas, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization responsible for the deaths of countless civilians and unwilling to recognize the existence of the Jewish state. As President Barack Obama recently [stated](#), “No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction—and we [the U.S.] will continue to demand that Hamas accept the basic responsibilities of peace, including recognizing Israel’s right to exist and rejecting violence and adhering to all existing agreements.” For more information on the peace process, click [here](#).

The Torah encourages us to take action to bring peace, and Israel has demonstrated its willingness to take concrete steps and make difficult sacrifices for the sake of peace with the Palestinian people. Now, the time has come for the Palestinians to take action themselves—including recognizing Israel’s right to exist and renouncing violence—return to the negotiating table, and work with the Israelis to end the conflict. ■

Unity of Purpose

A wagon for two princes (Numbers 7:3)

עגלה על שני נשיאים (במדבר ז:ג)

The Torah states that the princes donated wagons to transport the disassembled Tabernacle as part of their gifts towards the mobile temple’s consecration. Interestingly, we read that the twelve princes only donated a total of six wagons. Why did they not each individually donate a wagon for their tribe, just as they had done with the rest of their gifts? S’forno (on 7:3) explains that they gave the wagons in pairs “as a sign of brotherhood between them, that they be worthy that the presence [of God] should dwell among them.” With this understanding we see that they shared gifts to demonstrate that when the people unite together in the service of God, that unity serves as a powerful force to spread holiness in the world.

By donating gifts to the Tabernacle together, the princes united to demonstrate their commitment to God’s work. Nowadays, despite significant differences on myriad issues, America’s lawmakers are able to unite in support of the U.S.-Israel relationship, demonstrating their respect for the two nations’ shared values.

In his [address](#) to more than 10,000 delegates to AIPAC’s recent Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that the cause of Israel serves as a unifying force in American politics: “Support for Israel doesn’t divide America. It unites America. It unites the old and the young, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans.” Indeed, leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties addressed the conference and spoke of their support for the Jewish state. President Barack Obama said that “A strong and secure Israel is in the national security interests of the United States, not simply because we share strategic interests...It’s not simply because we face common dangers...America’s commitment to Israel’s security flows from a deeper place, and that’s the values we share.” Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) stated that “Much has been said here about the special bond between America and Israel. [Israeli] Ambassador Oren has called Israel ‘the ultimate ally.’ I could not agree more. In the last 63 years, through all the threats we have faced, America and Israel have formed—and honed—a strategic alliance built on trust and based on shared values.”

While the issues that divide political parties are great, like the princes who came together to make the world a better place, our elected officials can unite. When it comes to supporting the U.S.-Israel relationship, the values that America and Israel share make the friendship something on which we can all agree. ■

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