

SEPTEMBER 19, 2011

Parashat Netzavim-Vayelech

Individual Power and Responsibility

Every person in Israel (Deuteronomy 29:9)

כל איש ישראל (דברים כט:ט)

When delivering his final charge to the Israelites, Moses placed an unusual emphasis on the presence of every member of the Jewish nation by mentioning “your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives...” (29:9-10). The sages in the Midrash (Tanchuma Netzavim 2) explain that “From this we learn that all of Israel are held [responsible] for the sin of a single individual,” and cite the sin of Achan (see Joshua 22:20) to demonstrate how one person can bring suffering upon the entire nation. Interestingly, Rabbeinu Bechaya (on 29:9) also derives a positive lesson from the Midrash: “If regarding calamities, we find that the many are responsible for the sin of the individual, certainly the many are saved in the merit of the individual.”

Moses’ insistence on the presence of every single member of the community highlights the responsibility and power that every Jew has to protect the Jewish people. The lesson of the Midrash helps us understand that we must use that individual capability to protect and defend the Jewish state.

In ancient times, when political power remained in the hands of a few privileged individuals, the notion that one person could affect the fate of the entire Jewish people could only be understood in metaphysical terms—through prayer, study or good deeds. Yet today, with the advent of democracy, one person can quite literally affect us all by building relationships with policy makers. Those of us who care about Israel must take this historical lesson and contemporary opportunity to heart. When we take the time to communicate with our elected officials, we learn that they really do listen. When we call them to emphasize the importance of protecting the only true democracy in the Middle East, when we encourage them to visit Israel, and when they come understand the challenges that the country faces, those efforts pay off. To learn more about how you can make a difference, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

In our *parashah* Moses emphasized the critical presence of every Jew, young and old, to establish an eternal covenant with God before the nation entered the Land of Israel. It is with this enduring lesson in mind that we remember our individual responsibility to the safety and security of the state of Israel. ■

Unwilling to Seek Peace

For this matter is very close to you (Deuteronomy 30:14)

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד (דברים ל:יד)

The text reminds us that the Torah is meant to be accessible by stating that “this matter is very close to you.” What does this actually mean? The Midrash (Eliyahu Zuta chapter 14) relates a conversation between a fisherman and Elijah the prophet regarding this verse. When Elijah inquired why the man failed to keep the commandments, he replied: “In the heavens they gave me neither knowledge nor understanding for the study of Torah.” Elijah responded, “What is your profession?” and the man answered, “I am a fisherman.” Elijah then asked: “And who taught you to weave flax into nets, throw them into the sea to catch the fish?” He answered, “My master, this knowledge was given to me from the heavens.” Elijah said, “If they taught you this from the heavens, the words of Torah, about which it is written, ‘For it is very close to you,’ you were not given knowledge and understanding?”

In essence, Elijah pointed out to the fisherman that his inability to follow the commandments stemmed not from an incapacity to understand them, but from a lack of desire. Applying this parable to the complexities we see in the Middle East, one can clearly see that the Palestinians' failure to reach a peace agreement with Israel stems not from a lack of ability, but from their unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.

This month the Palestinian Authority (PA) officially launched its campaign to join the U.N. as a full member state, seeking to secure statehood outside the context of negotiations with Israel, the [Associated Press](#) reported. However, this action will not lead to peace, which can only be achieved through direct talks between the Palestinians and Israelis. In fact, by refusing to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and seeking recognition of a state at the U.N., PA President Mahmoud Abbas is damaging U.S. peace efforts. This is why President Barack Obama recently said that the United States would oppose the proposal in the United Nations Security Council. According to a [Haaretz](#) report, President Obama stated that "If this came to the Security Council we would object very strongly, precisely because we think it would be counterproductive. We don't think that it would actually lead to the outcome that we want, which is a two-state solution ... This issue is only gonna be resolved by Israelis and Palestinians agreeing to something." Speaking to reporters, U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice [called](#) the Palestinian move a "mistaken calculation" and a "dangerous diversion," adding that recognition of a Palestinian state would actually work against the Palestinians' own interests and would poison the environment for restarting negotiations toward a solution. For more on the Palestinian U.N. statehood bid, click [here](#).

The lesson of the Midrash resonates today; like the fisherman who was unwilling to make the effort necessary to grow closer to God, Abbas has plainly demonstrated what the greatest impediment is to peace in the Middle East: his lack of desire to achieve it. ■

Answering the Call

And I will surely hide My face (Deuteronomy 31:18)

(אֲנֹכִי הַסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר פְּנֵי (דְּבָרִים לֵא:יח)

In Moses' final message to the Israelites, he repeats God's warning that if the Jewish people choose to worship idols then God would "hide My face from them and they will be devoured" (31:18). What is this anthropomorphic description meant to teach us? Rashi (on Isaiah 8:17) notes that the concept of God's hidden face implies a severed connection with the Jewish people and an inability for the Israelites to turn to God in times of need. Put plainly, according to this view should our sins warrant it, God would "look away" and refuse to answer our calls for help.

Clearly this thought of calling out for aid and getting no response in return is a frightening prospect. Yet this is the exact situation that Israeli leaders recently found themselves in when they attempted to rescue personnel from Israel's embassy in Cairo. Thankfully, the United States responded to the call.

On September 10, as an Egyptian mob stormed the building that housed the Israeli embassy in Cairo, "Both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak tried to reach the head of the ruling Supreme Military Council Mohammed Tantawi over the phone overnight, but the Egyptians said they were 'unable to locate him,'" [Yediot Achronot](#) reported. The Israelis then turned to the United States for help. In his [statement](#) following the events in Cairo, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "I would like to express my gratitude to the President of the United States, Barack Obama. I asked for his help. This was a decisive and fateful moment. He said, 'I will do everything I can.' And so he did. He used every considerable means and influence of the United States to help us. We owe him a special measure of gratitude. This attests to the strong alliance between Israel and the United States. This alliance between Israel and the United States is especially important in these times of political storms and upheavals in the Middle East." To read an in-depth description of the riot in Cairo and the rescue, click [here](#).

The warning that God would "turn away" and refuse to heed our calls reminds us just how vital support can be. In times of need, nothing is more reassuring than hearing an ally say, "I am here. I will help." By offering its assistance, America reaffirmed the bond between our country and Israel, and ultimately saved six innocent peoples' lives. ■

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