

MARCH 28, 2011

Parashat Tazria - Hachodesh

A Lifetime of Shabbats

And in the eighth day...shall be circumcised (Leviticus 12:3) וביום השמיני ימול... (ויקרא יב:ג)

As the *brit milah* represents a covenant between God and the Jewish people, one would think that the ceremony should be performed at the first available opportunity. Yet, the Torah states that we must wait until the eighth day after birth to carry out the ritual. While Rambam (Guide to the Perplexed, chapter 49) explains that we wait “so that the strength of the baby should be increased,” why does the Torah deem the baby to be significantly more robust on the eighth day versus the fifth or sixth day? Torah Temimah (on 12:3) explains that eight days is the minimum amount of time necessary to ensure that the baby has passed through at least one Shabbat, which is important because the Midrash teaches that “Shabbat has the power to increase a person’s strength.” Therefore, we wait eight days because even as we seek to cement the covenant between the newborn baby and God without delay, our concern for the baby’s health is even more imperative.

The significance of the eight day waiting period highlights our tradition’s longstanding attention to the wellbeing of infants. In West Africa, we are seeing this concern manifest itself in the actions of a group of Israeli neonatologists.

With a population of 1.5 million people, Kumasi is Ghana’s second largest city. Yet, the metropolis’ lone hospital is overcrowded and undersupplied. Of the 28,000 babies born in Kumasi each year, some 4,800 die—presenting an infant mortality rate more than 10 times higher than many Western cities. To help reduce the infant mortality rate, a team of Israeli neonatologists brought in by the Alliance for Global Good, in cooperation with the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ MASHAV Agency for International Development, have established two new neonatal units for the local population, the website [Israel21c](#) reported. The Israeli medical team has also trained local doctors and nurses in advanced low cost methods to help save the lives of babies. As MASHAV Director Haim Divon stated, “We believe it is our obligation as human beings and as a nation to share whatever we have with others.”

Just as the Jewish tradition shows incredible consideration for the health and well-being of baby boys before their circumcisions, Israeli neonatologists in Kumasi show a continued care for the fragility of infants’ lives. Thanks to Israel’s dedication to helping the less fortunate, many of these newborn babies will have the strength to live a lifetime of Shabbats. ■

One Who Desires Life

In the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy (Leviticus 13:2) בעור בשרו לנגע צרעת (ויקרא יג:ב)

The Midrash Vayikra Rabbah (16:2), noting that leprosy directly resulted from the sin of slanderous speech, relays the following story: “Rabbi Yanai was sitting in his room studying when he suddenly heard the cry of a peddler from the street. ‘Who wants life? Who wants life?’ As a crowd quickly gathered around the salesman, Rabbi Yanai’s interest was also piqued. Who doesn’t want life? He stuck his head out of the window and called to the peddler, ‘Come up here and sell [your product] to me!’ The salesman looked up and said, ‘Your honor doesn’t need my wares, nor his friends.’ Undeterred, Rabbi Yanai pressed, ‘I nonetheless wish to see your merchandise.’ The man pulled out a book

of Psalms and pointed out the verse, ‘Who is the man that desires life, and loves days, that he may see good therein? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile’ (Psalms 34:13-14).”

The idea that avoiding negative speech brings life is so prevalent in Judaism that Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan named his most famous book, which outlines the laws prohibiting slanderous speech, *Chafetz Chaim*—Desirer of Life. However, the negative corollary is true as well. As recent events have demonstrated, hateful speech can lead to deadly outcomes.

In the wake of a heinous terror attack against an Israeli family in their home, two U.S. lawmakers circulated a letter encouraging President Barack Obama to take action to curb incitement by the Palestinian Authority (PA) against Israelis, [The Hill](#) reported. The letter, penned by Reps. Steve Rothman (D-NJ) and Steve Austria (R-OH), urges Obama to engage PA President Mahmoud Abbas to eradicate terrorist elements, join peace negotiations with the Israelis and root out “all vestiges of incitement.” While Abbas did eventually condemn the terrible murder of the five members of the Fogel family, though not in the Palestinian media, the PA often takes steps to glorify those who conduct acts of terror—including awarding scholarships to the families of murderers and naming public squares after terrorists. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a conversation with Abbas, told him that not only does Israel expect the PA to stop the incitement, but stressed that “educating people toward peace is an integral part of peace.”

If the PA truly wants to end the conflict with Israel, it must heed the Midrash’s message and come out of the dark shadows of its negative, slanderous campaign against the Jewish state and prepare the Palestinian people for the compromises necessary to make peace. Only then will it truly be “one who desires life.” ■

Proper Preparations (Parashat Hachodesh)

This month shall be to you... (Exodus 12:2)

החודש הזה לכם (שמות יב:ב)

On the last Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Nisan we read about how Moses conveyed the commandment to prepare the Paschal lamb before the Exodus. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov (see the Book of Our Heritage vol. II p. 118) notes that this special reading reminded the ancient Israelites to begin their travels to Jerusalem to make their own Passover offerings: “This reading which reminded the people that Nisan was at hand also reminded them of the approach of Pesach, so that they could make preparations for the pilgrimage.” We read this section for the very same reason, to ensure that we clean our homes, buy the *matzah* and make all the other preparations necessary to usher in the Passover holiday in a proper manner.

Yet, while we prepare for Passover, Israel finds herself preparing for increased violence from the Gaza Strip. With the escalation of rocket and mortar attacks from Gaza, and the apprehension of yet another ship carrying Iranian weapons to Hamas in the coastal strip, Israel is once again reminded of why it spends so much of its budget on defense.

Israel must devote close to seven percent of its gross domestic product to its defense—almost double that of the United States and the highest proportion in the industrialized world. Thankfully, in 2007, the United States and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), in which America promised to provide \$30 billion in security aid to Israel over 10 years. This MOU is vital to ensure that Israel—which will never be able to match its adversaries in the quantity of troops or weapons—maintains its qualitative military edge over those that threaten the Jewish state and seek to undermine U.S. interests in the region. Beyond deterring war and supporting efforts toward peace, U.S. aid to Israel helps the United States in other tangible ways. Israel spends 75 percent of its aid in the United States, boosting America’s defense industry and employment. Israel also regularly shares its cutting-edge technology and lessons learned with America’s military to help our soldiers accomplish their missions while protecting them from the dangers of the battlefield. For more on U.S. aid to Israel, click [here](#).

This Shabbat, as Parashat Hachodesh reminds us of the importance of preparation, we must remind our elected officials of the importance of American aid to Israel. In so doing, we will be helping to ensure that the Jewish state remains ready and able to meet the growing threats to her security. ■