



Sermon Tidbits

MAY 21, 2012

Parashat Bamidbar & Shavuot

Special Consideration

The tribe of Levi you shall not number (Numbers 1:49)

את מטה לוי לא תפקד (במדבר א:מט)

According to the Torah, God said to Moses, “the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor shall you take the sum of them among the Children of Israel” (1:49). Yet later in the Torah, the instructions contradict when God told Moses to “Number the children of Levi by their fathers’ houses, by their families” (Numbers 3:15). Nahmanides (on 1:49) suggests that this contradiction is because the Torah does want Moses to count the members of Levi, but in a special way. “The Lord explained [to Moses] that he must not count them among the Children of Israel. [Rather he should] count them alone, for he would appoint them [as responsible for] the Tabernacle... [this means that Moses] alone must count them, without [the aid of] the princes.”

Moses counted the tribe of Levi in a manner that highlighted their unique role within the Jewish nation. In modern times, U.S. decision makers recognize Israel’s special role in securing Middle East stability—and recently proposed U.S. appropriations to bolster Israel’s missile defense.

The Obama administration said that it would give \$70 million to Israel in order to enhance its Iron Dome missile defense system, with more money in the pipeline, [JTA](#) reported. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said after meeting with his Israeli counterpart, Ehud Barak, “My goal is to ensure Israel has the funding it needs each year to produce these batteries that can protect its citizens.” Legislation under consideration in Congress, shaped in consultation with administration officials, would deliver \$680 million to Israel for the system, which earlier this year successfully intercepted rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. The House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs recently approved a bill spearheaded by Subcommittee Chair Kay Granger (R-TX) and Ranking Member Nita Lowey (D-NY) that includes \$3.1 billion in security assistance to Israel and other key provisions that strengthen the U.S.-Israel alliance. “This Subcommittee understands just how critical it is to support Israel,” Granger said in a [press release](#). “Whether it is the ongoing threat from Iran trying to pursue a nuclear weapon—or the instability that continues as a result of the Arab uprising—Israel’s security faces serious threats... This Subcommittee understands the risks, and we understand what is at stake for both Israel and the United States.” For more on U.S. aid to Israel, click [here](#).

Like the Levites, whose unique role justified special treatment, Israel’s role as the only democratic ally of the United States in the Middle East merits assistance to ensure Israel’s safety, security and stability. ■

Power and Responsibility

Cut not off... (Numbers 4:18)

אל תכריתו (במדבר ד:יח)

The tribe of Levi was assigned to carry the vessels of the Tabernacle. This was an especially dangerous appointment because simply gazing at the uncovered holy vessels could be fatal. For this reason, according to the text, God instructed Moses to warn the priests who covered the vessels before they were transported, to “Cut not off [kill] the tribe of the families of the Kohanites from among the Levites” (4:18). The priests were instructed to properly cover the sacred items so that the Levites, “may live, and not die” (4:20). Rabbi Moshe Calphon HaKohen (see Ma’ayan

Hashavua vol. III page 50) notes that Moses held the priests responsible for any Levite death which resulted from their inattentiveness in covering the vessels.

The priests' responsibility for any tragedy which resulted from their inaction reminds us of our obligation to take action and use our power as American citizens to help make sure Iran does not develop nuclear weapons.

U.S. and international sanctions, designed to persuade Tehran to end its pursuit of nuclear weapons, are having an unprecedented impact on the Iranian economy. According to [The Washington Post](#), "The country's worsening prospects have encouraged Western governments as they prepare for nuclear talks with Iran...U.S. officials say the building economic pressure increases the chances for a breakthrough in which Iran would agree to abandon elements of its nuclear program. 'They are increasingly isolated—diplomatically, financially and economically,' David Cohen, the Treasury Department's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence said." While sanctions are having an unprecedented impact on Iran, they have not reached the level sufficient to end the regime's nuclear weapons pursuit. As the Senate considers additional sanctions as part of The Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Human Rights Act (S. 2101), we must add our voices to the call to pass this critical legislation. It will enshrine in law that it is U.S. policy to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, escalate the level of sanctions against the regime's human rights violators, and sharply tighten the enforcement of existing sanctions law. For more on Iran sanctions, click [here](#).

As the priests learned when they were warned to safeguard the lives of the Levites, with the power to protect comes the responsibility to act. Now, as Americans, we must act and influence our elected officials to pass legislation that protects our country, our allies and the world. ■

Unity (Shavuot)

And there Israel encamped (Exodus 19:2)

ויחן שם ישראל (שמות יט:ב)

When the Jews arrived at Sinai prior to the revelation, the Torah notes that "there Israel encamped before the mount" (19:2). Yet, instead of the normal conjugation of the word "and they encamped"—*vayachanu*—in plural, the Torah utilizes the singular form of the verb—*vayichan*—which literally means "and he camped." According to Rashi this irregularity is because the nation camped "as one man, with one heart." The Midrash (Tanchuma Yashan Yitro 9) adds that "God wanted to give the Torah to Israel immediately following the Exodus. Yet, they constantly argued with one-another... [Before they arrived at Sinai] they became a unified group. Said God, 'The Torah is a book of peace. To whom shall I give it? To a nation that loves peace.'"

Only through unity did the Jewish nation merit to receive the Torah. Today, the need for unity—both in Israel and in the United States—is critical in order to properly protect and defend the Jewish state.

Recently, unity has played an important role both in the United States and in Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed a new unity government comprised of 94 out of 120 seats in the Knesset. In addition to a number of pressing domestic concerns, according to Netanyahu, the new coalition will seek to "advance a responsible peace process" with the Palestinians and insist that Iran must not achieve a nuclear weapons capability. Here in the U.S., both major political parties are united in overwhelming support for Israel throughout the government. The House of Representatives passed bipartisan legislation reaffirming and enhancing U.S. policy commitments to Israel's security, [JTA](#) reported. The United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012, which was sponsored by House Majority Leader Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA) and House Democratic Whip Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), passed by a vote of 411-2, and garnered support from 294 co-sponsors prior to passage. For more on legislation that will strengthen U.S. and Israeli security, click [here](#).

Unity was a prerequisite for the Jewish nation to receive the Torah at Sinai. Now unity in both America and the Jewish state represents our best chance to overcome the daunting challenges the U.S. and Israel must face together. ■

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