

OCTOBER 7, 2012

Parashat Bereishit

Utter Chaos

Now the earth was unformed and void (Genesis 1:2)

והארץ היתה תהו ובהו (בראשית א:ב)

In context, the phrase *tohu va'vohu* connotes the chaotic nothingness that described the universe before creation. However, commentators find the phrase challenging to accurately translate. Rashi (on 1:2) explains that “the word *tohu* has the meaning of astonishment and amazement, for a person would be astonished and amazed at the void in [the world]...*vohu* has the meaning of emptiness and void.” Interestingly, the prophet Jeremiah used this exact phrase to describe the post-apocalyptic desolation that would follow the Jews’ exile stating, “I beheld the earth [following the destruction], and, lo, it was waste and void [*tohu va'vohu*]” (Jeremiah 4:23).

The phrase *tohu va'vohu* in the Torah that described the nothingness that preceded creation, and later referred to scenes of utter destruction and desolation, could today aptly describe the chaos that grips Syria.

After countless speeches, meetings and behind-the-scenes discussions, the war in Syria remained the unsolved problem that loomed over this year’s gathering of world leaders at the United Nations early this month. As the week-long meeting of the U.N. General Assembly ended, there were no breakthroughs regarding the Syrian conflict. Dozens of nations excoriated the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad for its role in a conflict that has killed at least 30,000 Syrians. According to [Agence France Presse](#), more than 305 people were killed across Syria at the end of last month. Fighting raged in Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, after a fire in its historic covered market underscored how deepening civil war is tearing apart a country at the heart of the Middle East, The Financial Times reported. Meanwhile, in addition to the likely 700,000 Syrians fleeing to neighboring countries for safety and aid by the end of the year, the United Nations estimates that as many as 1.5 million Syrians have been displaced internally, a challenge fast outpacing relief efforts by the Syrian government and aid groups such as the Red Crescent, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

Tohu va'vohu describes the chaotic nothingness prior to creation as well as the desolation that would follow the Jews’ exile. This type of chaos endures as the Syrian regime continues to crush the protest movement within the country. ■

The Seeds of Democracy

And God created man (Genesis 1:27)

ויברא אלקים את האדם (בראשית א:כז)

The book of Genesis conveys how God created man and mankind. However, the Sages note that instead of separately creating each individual person, God created a single pair of people from which all of humanity developed. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 37) notes that we were created from a single individual “for the sake of peace between people, so that one would not say to his fellow man, ‘My father is greater than your father.’” We all emanate from one couple to instill in us the notion of equality of all human beings.

The principle of equality embedded into the fabric of the story of creation forms the bedrock for the democratic principles upon which both the United States and Israel were founded. In fact, this shared value is at the core of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

In the moving preamble to the Declaration of Independence, the founding fathers of the United States noted the connection between their belief in creation and the nation they were risking their lives to establish: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Israel’s Declaration of Independence proclaims many of the same democratic principles that the United States adheres to, including “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex...(and) freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture...” The two countries have developed a resilient friendship, based in large part to this unshakable dedication to common values. Both nations were founded by refugees seeking political and religious freedom. Both were forced to fight for independence against foreign powers. Both have absorbed waves of immigrants seeking political freedom and economic well-being. And both have evolved into democracies that respect the rule of law. The United States and Israel continue to thrive because of their allegiance to these basic values of equality and the freedom that equality demands. For more on shared values between the U.S. and Israel, click [here](#).

As we begin the Torah anew and read the story of creation, let us remember the importance of equality. While democracy is common in the West, Israel is a unique sanctuary of freedom and pluralism in the Middle East, protecting its citizens’ rights while upholding the progressive values it shares with America. ■

A Fateful Choice

If you do well, it shall be lifted up (Genesis 4:7)

הלל אה תיטיב שאת (בראשית ד: ז)

According to the Torah, Cain recognized that his brother Abel’s offering was accepted while his intentionally inferior offering (see Rashi on 4:3) was not. He grew “very angry and his face fell” (4:5). God challenged Cain to either improve or suffer the consequences, telling him “If you improve, it shall be lifted up” (4:7). Targum Onkelos translates God’s message to Cain to mean, “If you improve your behavior, your [sins] will be forgiven; but should you not improve, your sins will be kept for the days of judgment in the future.” Cain represented the first choice between repentance, improvement and forgiveness, or the alternative choice to continue to sin and accept the consequences of those actions. Tragically, Cain chose to kill his brother in a jealous rage, thus suffering years of exile and wandering.

When faced with a choice, Cain chose to suffer the consequences of his actions. Today, Iran also faces a choice; it can reap the benefits of abandoning its nuclear enrichment or continue on its path while suffering harsh sanctions.

Despite the imposition of American-led sanctions over Iran’s nuclear program, the country’s leaders scoffed at the idea that the measures were having any serious impact. But [The Washington Post](#) reported, in the first week of October, that the Iranian rial fell by a shocking 40 percent and protests began to rumble through Tehran. U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland [said](#), “Iran is increasingly cut off from the global financial system. Significant amounts of Iranian oil are also coming off the market. The currency is plummeting. And firms all over the world are refusing to do business with Iranian companies...The issues here are the choices that the Iranian Government is making, and this is the issue, that the Iranian Government needs to make different choices with regard to its nuclear program...” White House Press Secretary Jay Carney added, “That situation is a direct result of the choices made by Iranian leaders. Due to their poor choices and economic mismanagement, Iran’s economy is under unprecedented pressure.” For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

Like Cain, who faced a choice of changing his ways or suffering the consequences, the leaders of Iran face a similar choice: join the international community and abandon its illicit nuclear weapons program, or stubbornly continue to develop nuclear weapons and suffer the effects of crippling economic sanctions. ■

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