



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 25, 2012

Parashat Chukat

Peace to his People

They wept for Aaron thirty days (Numbers 20:29)

ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום (במדבר כ:כט)

According to the Torah, after Moses' death, "the Children of Israel wept for Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:8). The Midrash (Pirkei D'rabbi Eliezer 17) interpreted this to mean only the men were the ones who mourned Moses' death. However, when Aaron died, the Torah tells us "they wept for Aaron thirty days, all the house of Israel" (20:29), meaning the entire nation—both men and women—mourned for Aaron. Why was the communal outpouring greater for Aaron? The Midrash explains, "for he loved peace, and chased after peace, and would pass through the camp each day and bring peace between husband and wife, between a man and his fellow." The entire nation recognized the greatness of Aaron in his tireless efforts to bring peace, tranquility and harmony to the people.

Aaron's greatness was in his dedication to the well-being of his people, and his efforts to bring peace to their midst. Recently, Israeli President Shimon Peres received the Medal of Freedom and was recognized for his similar devotion to his people as well as an extraordinary commitment to bringing peace to the Middle East.

On June 13, President Barack Obama bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, to Israeli President Shimon Peres. Obama [noted](#) that, "One of our strongest allies, and one of our closest friends, is the state of Israel." The President added, "in [Shimon Peres] we see the essence of Israel itself—an indomitable spirit that will not be denied...He knows that we must not only seek peace, but we must pursue peace." Obama's praise continued, "at times, some have seen his hope and called Shimon Peres a dreamer. And they are right. Just look at his life. The dream of generations, after 2,000 years, to return to Israel, the historic homeland of the Jewish people—Shimon lived it." In his response after receiving the medal, Peres said, "I receive this honor today on behalf of the People of Israel. They are the true recipients of this honor. With this moving gesture, you are paying tribute to generations upon generations of Jews who dreamed of, and fought for, a State of their own...my greatest hope is that a dawn will arise when every man and women—Israeli or Palestinian, Syrian or Lebanese—will wake up in the morning and be able to say to themselves, I am free to be free." For more on Israel's pursuit of peace, click [here](#).

Just as the entire Jewish nation recognized Aaron both for his devotion to them and for his extraordinary efforts to bringing peace, Israeli President Shimon Peres is honored for guiding his nation in their ongoing dreams of peace. ■

A Dual Message

And Israel sent messengers (Numbers 21:21)

וישלח ישראל מלאכים (במדבר כא:כא)

Twice in the Torah we read about a message sent to Sihon asking permission for the Jewish people to pass through his territory on the way to the Holy Land. In the verse we read this week, "Israel sent messengers" (21:21). Later, the same event appears in Deuteronomy and Moses relates, "I sent messengers..." (Deuteronomy 2:26). Where did the message originate: from the nation or Moses? The Midrash (Tanchuma) explains that in truth, both sent messages to Sihon. "Our rabbis said, they wrote two letters: one of peace, and one of conflict." In essence, the Jewish people offered Sihon the option to choose the path of peace. Yet, should he choose to fight, they were prepared for that eventuality as well.

Just as the Children of Israel sent messages to Sihon, the world must clearly convey to Iran that while it prefers to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear research through negotiations, every option must be considered.

The recent international talks in Moscow aimed at convincing Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons research ended without an agreement. While President Obama has said he wants a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear conflict, he also has said that all options are on the table including military ones. In that vein, [Foreign Policy](#) reported that 44 senators, in a bipartisan letter organized by Sens. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Roy Blunt (R-MO), wrote that "It is past time for the Iranians to take the concrete steps that would reassure the world that their nuclear program is, as they claim, exclusively peaceful." History shows us that when this Iranian regime was scared, it froze its nuclear program. When American soldiers entered Iraq in 2003, Iran feared it would be next and stopped work on developing a nuclear weapon. But when the mullahs' fear diminished, Iranian nuclear scientists returned to business as usual and have been at it ever since. This concept was recently reinforced by former U.S. senator Chuck Robb while [testifying](#) at a House Armed Services Committee hearing. "It is a credible threat of force when pursued together with diplomacy and sanctions that proves the best hope for peace." For more on Iran visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

By sending two messages to the Amorites, the Jews clearly articulated both a preference for peace and a willingness to take other steps if necessary. As the international community works to peacefully resolve the decade-long dispute over Iran's nuclear program, there is still no clear progress and all options must remain on the table. ■

Extending a Hand for Peace

And Israel sent messengers (Numbers 21:21)

וישלח ישראל מלאכים (במדבר כא:כא)

After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Children of Israel made their way toward the Holy Land and attempted to traverse neighboring lands peacefully. Yet Sihon, the King of the Amorites, not only refused to allow the Jews peaceful passage, but attacked them instead. The Midrash (Tanchuma Chukat 22) notes that God never commanded Moses to attempt to negotiate with Sihon, and actually commanded Moses to conquer the Amorites. Still, Moses opted for peace first. "Even though God told the [nation], 'begin to possess [Sihon's land] and contend with him in battle' (Deuteronomy 2:31), they chased after peace [instead], as it is written, 'And Israel sent messengers to Sihon.'"

Time and again Israel has demonstrated its willingness to make tough sacrifices for peace. Yet, like Sihon who rebuffed overtures of peace, the Palestinian Authority (PA) continues to reject the Jewish state's attempts to negotiate.

In an address at Israel's Institute for the National Security Studies' Conference on Security Challenges at the end of May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#), "I call again on [PA President] Mahmoud Abbas not to miss this unique opportunity [of Israel's unity government] and give peace a chance. Let me clarify—I have not set any conditions to enter into negotiations. Certainly I will have conditions to conclude negotiations, and so will Mahmoud Abbas...But this is why I say to Abbas—don't miss out on this opportunity to extend your hand in peace. If I had to say it another way, I would say, 'President Abbas, all we are saying is 'give peace a chance.'" Yet, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported, as chief PLO negotiator Saeb Erekat was preparing to discuss ways of reviving the stalled peace talks with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Abbas declared the peace process "clinically dead," explaining that in his mind, Israel bears full responsibility. For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

When Moses extended himself to the Amorites in the hopes of peace, the Amorites rebuffed his efforts and threatened violence instead. Today, as Israel calls for direct talks without preconditions, the Palestinian Authority must rise to the occasion in efforts to take the necessary steps to move towards a lasting peace agreement. ■

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