

MARCH 5, 2012

Parashat Ki Tisa

The Eternal Value of Equality

The rich shall not give more (Exodus 30:15)

העשיר לא ירבה (שמות ל:טו)

In order to construct and maintain the Tabernacle, a half-shekel was collected from each and every Jew. The donation accurately counted the population and also gave everyone an equal opportunity to contribute to the Temple. While Chizkuni (on 30:15) explains that every person had to give equivalent amounts to ensure an accurate census, Ibn Ezra finds a deeper, principled reasoning behind the rule based on the Torah's statement that the contribution represented "a ransom for his [the contributor's] soul" (30:12). According to this view, regardless of economic status, the contribution always had to be a half-shekel because whether rich or poor, everyone is equal before God.

The identical half-shekel donation from every individual etched the value of equality into the consciousness of the Jewish nation. A recent diplomatic appointment demonstrates how the modern state of Israel works hard to promote this critical value of equal rights for all of its citizens.

Israel's Declaration of Independence proclaims "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..." This ethos is reflected in the fact that Israel is the most advanced and tolerant country in the Middle East. It values fair trials and the protection of minority rights. It's also the leading nation in the region in the protection of gay rights, with strong anti-discrimination laws. Israel consistently takes steps to combat racial discrimination and ensure equality across Israeli society. Moreover, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently [noted](#) the significance of the appointment of Ethiopian immigrant Belaynesh Zevadia as Israel's ambassador to Ethiopia. Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said that beyond the fact that Zevadia is a talented diplomat, "This appointment is particularly significant in that it sends a message about fighting against discrimination, and I am proud to be the first foreign minister to appoint an Ethiopian ambassador on behalf of the state of Israel." Commenting on her appointment, Zevadia said that "This is proof that in Israel opportunity is available to everyone, native Israelis and new immigrants alike."

The uniform half shekel donation mandated by the Torah communicated the value of equality before God. Through the years, Israel continues to uphold this sacred value by striving to ensure equal rights for all Israeli citizens. ■

Stifling Dissent

And Aaron saw and he built an altar (Exodus 32:5)

וירא אהרן ויבן מזבח (שמות לב:ה)

How could Aaron, who would soon serve as the high priest in the Tabernacle, participate in the construction of the Golden Calf? Rashi (on 32:5) suggests that he feared for his life: "According to the Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah, Aaron saw many things. He saw Hur, his nephew, who was rebuking the people, and they killed him." When Hur stood up to the mob undertaking the idolatrous act, the people murdered him in cold blood rather than allow him to speak. Aaron, fearing the same fate, therefore submitted to their wishes and assisted in the construction of the idol.

Just as the crowd killed Aaron's nephew when he attempted to speak out against the building of the Golden Calf, the Syrian regime has brutally murdered thousands in an attempt to stifle dissent and ensure that Bashar Assad maintains a firm grip on the country.

Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the world has to take action to prevent Assad's forces from continuing their attacks, which she said had resulted in "countless atrocities" the [Associated Press](#) reported. The U.N. human rights chief also declared that there needs to be an immediate humanitarian cease-fire in Syria, where the situation continues to deteriorate as the Assad regime steps up its onslaught against the opposition. Speaking at an urgent meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council, Pillay urged Syria to end all fighting, allow international monitors to enter the country and give aid agencies unhindered access. Esther Brimmer, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, said that "Without a halt to the killing and a guarantee of immediate humanitarian access, this despicable regime will murder many more before this heinous chapter in Syria's history is over." Tragically, as [The Washington Post](#) reports, as the fighting intensified dozens of bodies were recently found dumped on the outskirts of the stricken city of Homs. This mass killing appears to be one of the worst instances since the uprising against President Bashar Assad began last March. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

Like the idolaters who used violence and intimidation to force Aaron to submit to their will and build them an idol, the leadership of Syria has resorted to brutal tactics to stifle any voice of dissent against its radical policies. ■

The Closest Relationship

Face to face (Exodus 33:11)

פנים אל פנים (שמות לג:יא)

Among the many ways that people can communicate, personal, face-to-face interaction is the most meaningful. In fact, the Torah describes the interaction between Moses and God in this very manner. The Midrash (Lekach Tov Vayikra 1:1) notes that this description connotes the closest possible relationship that a human being could enjoy with the divine; the verse itself notes that they spoke, "as a man speaks to his friend." Rambam (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 7:6) notes that the term "face-to-face" suggests a singular form of prophecy, in which God appears, "not through the means of an angel, without any riddle or allegory. Rather, [the prophet] sees matters as they actually are." Put simply, face-to-face interaction creates an intimate, close and trusted connection between two parties.

In using the language "face-to-face" to label the closeness between God and Moses, the Torah describes their relationship in the warmest possible term. In modern times, this same phrase could be used to describe the U.S.-Israel relationship.

As President Barack Obama recently stated, "The enemies of Israel should have no doubt that regardless of Party, Americans stand shoulder to shoulder in our commitment to Israel's security." This isn't surprising; the U.S.-Israel relationship is a deep and natural alliance between two democracies that share a commitment to the rule of law, freedom of religion and speech and human rights. Long-standing U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation allows the two allies to face common threats, including terrorism and weapons proliferation. Israeli innovation in the defense and homeland security areas has helped protect American soldiers abroad and civilians at home. Joint U.S.-Israel research and trade has helped strengthen the economies of both nations. Joint research programs and a Free Trade Agreement—the first between the United States and any country—have spurred collaboration, innovation and commerce between the allies. And, the strategic partnership between the United States and Israel has helped both countries keep their soldiers safe, strengthen their military and protect their homelands. Through joint training, programs and research and development, Israeli expertise has helped the United States protect Americans at home and abroad. With no other country in the region—and few in the entire world—does the United States share the same high level of strategic cooperation as it does with Israel.

The term "face-to-face" conveys the close relationship God and Moses enjoyed. The U.S. and Israel share this same kind of "face-to-face" closeness as they work to counter dangerous threats and make the world a better place. ■

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