

JULY 16, 2012

Parashat Matot-Masei

An Unwilling Leader

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes (Numbers 30:2)

וידבר משה אל ראשי המטות (במדבר ל:ב)

Communal and political leaders often play a primary role in determining whether their constituents enjoy success or suffer failure. For this reason, Moses relayed the commandments connected to fulfilling verbal oaths specifically via “the heads of the tribes” (30:2). The Midrash (Midrash Hagadol) makes a clear connection between the merits of a generation and their leadership teaching that, “there are some [communal] leaders who lead their followers to goodness, and there are others who hinder their people with wickedness.”

Leaders, the Midrash tells us, have the power to raise their people up or weigh them down. Sadly, today the Palestinian people suffer from a leadership unwilling to lead them towards peace talks with the Jewish state.

While Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas [told](#) Israel’s Channel 2 News that negotiations remained his “first, second, and third” option, he suggested that while he was not issuing an ultimatum, a U.N. bid would be pursued if there was no horizon for peace. However, Abbas rejected Israeli Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu’s call for direct talks without preconditions. He explained that talks with Netanyahu depended on the release of 123 Palestinian prisoners who were jailed by Israel prior to the signing of the 1993 Oslo interim peace accords. [Haaretz](#) reported, Netanyahu made an offer to initially release 25 Palestinian security prisoners convicted of murdering Israelis and the subsequent release of another 100 prisoners over four stages by the end of 2012. Still, Palestinian Authority Minister of Prisoner Affairs Issa Qaraqe confirmed that Abbas rejected Netanyahu’s offer, demanding instead that the prisoners be released at once and not over various stages. “I want to renew negotiations, but Abbas missed the chance,” Netanyahu said during a press conference. For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

By conveying the commandments of oaths specifically through the heads of the tribes, the Torah reminds us of the critical role that leaders play in the lives of their people. Instead of leading his people to goodness, Palestinian Authority President Abbas seems intent on keeping them mired in conflict indefinitely. ■

Connected Branches

But we ourselves will be ready armed (Numbers 32:17)

ואנחנו נחליץ חשים (במדבר לב:יז)

Although the tribes of Reuben and Gad requested permission to inherit the rich, lush lands on the eastern bank of the Jordan River instead of their plot in the Land of Israel, they promised to join with the rest of the nation in the conquest of the Land. They said to Moses, “and we will be armed *chushim*” translated by Rashi to mean “quickly.” The tribes promised to hurry to fight with the rest of the nation. Yet, Maharam in his commentary (on 32:17), offers a different interpretation, suggesting that the word *chushim* can refer to “branches” of a reed. He writes that, “many shoots sprout from one root and they press close together to each other...[the tribes tell Moses that] we will fight close together, as this is the way of armies which go out to war, that they press close together like the branches of a reed.”

Like the tribes of Gad and Reuben that promised to stand close together with the rest of the nation, the U.S. has strengthened its close strategic cooperation with Israel to combat the threat of terrorism and Islamic extremism.

From terrorism, the spread of radical Islamist ideology and nuclear and missile proliferation to narcotics, counterfeiting and cyber warfare, Israel and the United States face unprecedented challenges. For this reason, thanks to the strong support of our elected officials in both the Senate and House of Representatives, Congress recently passed the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012. The House bill, which passed on May 8 by a resounding vote of 411-2, was led by Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) and Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD). The Senate version, which passed by voice vote on June 29, was spearheaded by Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Johnny Isakson (R-GA). This important legislation reaffirms that the U.S. commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable and that America is committed to providing Israel the means to defend itself by itself. This bill recommends several ways to strengthen U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation in such fields as missile defense, homeland security, energy, intelligence and cyber-security. We must thank our members of the House and Senate for supporting the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act of 2012. For more on enhanced U.S. Israel security cooperation, click [here](#).

Just as Reuben and Gad promised to join the rest of the Israelites to support the nation of Israel, America similarly has committed to maintaining and enhancing its strong, close relationship with the Jewish state. ■

Every Single Life

There shall be for you six cities of refuge (Numbers 35:13) (שש ערי מקלט תהיינה לכם (במדבר לה:יג))

The Torah describes in great detail the laws of the city of refuge, which require that a person who accidentally kills another individual must seek sanctuary in a designated city in order to avoid suffering retribution for the death that he caused. The Sefer Hachinuch (Commandment 409) explains that the punishment of exile attests to the great significance that Judaism places on the loss of even a single life. “Because the sin of murder is so severe that it is considered like destroying the entire world...therefore it is appropriate that even one who killed accidentally—since such a great tragedy came at his hand—that he should suffer the pain of exile [from his home]...in that he is separated from his loved ones and the place of his birth and he must live for the rest of his life with strangers.”

The laws of the city of refuge highlight the importance that Judaism places on every human life, and compels us to recoil from the estimated 17,000 innocent civilian deaths from the ongoing uprising in Syria.

Recently, the officer commanding United Nations monitors in Syria said that violence there has reached “unprecedented” levels, making it impossible for his unarmed observers to resume their mission, which was suspended [The New York Times](#) reported. Maj. Gen. Robert Mood of Norway said to reporters in Damascus that “the escalation of violence, allow me to say to an unprecedented level, obstructed our ability to observe, verify, report as well as assist in local dialogue.” It would be impossible to revive his mission without a cease-fire, he added. But in the third installment of an interview which a Turkish newspaper published this week, Syrian President Bashar Assad showed no readiness to heed either cease-fire calls or a plan proposed by Kofi Annan, the special envoy on Syria, for a transitional government. Additionally, according to a disturbing article in [The Times of Israel](#), a former commander in Syria's military intelligence directorate, which operates under the direct authority of President Assad, claimed that the Assad regime ordered its commanders to “shoot to kill five percent of the participants in any given demonstration.” According to the former commander if there were 1,000 demonstrators, the order was to kill 50, in order to strike fear and create deterrence. Syria's leadership has lost much international credibility, having been accused of severe human rights abuses, provoking confrontation with neighboring Turkey, and suffering a rash of high-ranking military defections. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

The Torah reminds us through the laws of the cities of refuge that each and every life is significant, and reinforces the fact that the international community must persuade Bashar Assad to end its destructive mass killings in Syria. ■

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