



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 13, 2012

Parashat Mishpatim

A Murderer in the Making

If a man comes deliberately (Exodus 21:14)

וכי יזיד איש (שמות כא:יד)

While outlining the punishment for murder, the Torah utilizes seemingly repetitive language: “And if a man comes deliberately against another, to kill him intentionally” (21:14). Why would the Torah need to state that a murder was both deliberate and intentional? Netziv, in Ha’amek Dakar on 21:14, clarifies using a novel interpretation of the word *yazid*, based on the phrase from Genesis 25:29, “and Jacob stewed a stew”—in Hebrew, *voyaged Ya’akov nazid*. “Just as the stew boils gradually and does not immediately burn but instead cooks slowly, so too [the murderer] arrived [gradually and slowly] in his anger to kill through deception.” Thus, Netziv’s new translation of the phrase avoids the repetitive language: “And if a man stews in anger against another, to kill him with deceit.” While murder can be a sudden crime of passion, at other times it results from a slow-burning, premeditated hatred.

The Torah makes special mention of a murderer whose anger boils slowly inside of him as he plots his crime. How scary to think that this same description could be used in the future to describe the leadership of Iran if they achieve their goal of developing nuclear weapons.

For years the Iranian government has been spewing hatred and invective against the state of Israel, making veiled and often overt threats to destroy it. In October 2006, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, “This regime [Israel] will be gone, definitely...The wrath of the region’s people is boiling...You should not complain that we did not give a warning. We are saying this explicitly now...” In fact, Ahmadinejad has [stated many times](#) that Israel should no longer exist. Meanwhile, the International Atomic Energy Agency released an unprecedented and detailed report in November 2011 providing the agency’s first public confirmation that Iran is closing in on the capability to produce nuclear weapons—a stark wake-up call that time to prevent Iran’s nuclear breakout is fast running out. While Iran has denied the assertion that it is trying to build nuclear weapons, claiming instead to want nuclear power for civilian purposes only, the facts are clear. That is why American policy must unabashedly seek to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability. For more on Iran visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

Like the murderer whose cruel intentions cause anger to overtake him, Iran seems primed to destroy Israel if given the opportunity. We cannot ignore the combination of words and deed—of hateful rhetoric and illicit weapons production—emanating from the leadership of Iran. ■

Preserving Human Dignity

If a man shall strike his servant (Exodus 21:20)

וכי יכה איש את עבדו (שמות כא:כ)

The Torah states that if a slave-owner kills his servant then that servant “shall be avenged,” a term the rabbis in the Talmud explain to mean that this slave-owner is executed like any other murderer. While today this might seem obvious, in biblical times, when owning—and often abusing—slaves was all too common, this commandment highlighted the great value that Judaism places on human life. Moreover, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch noted (on 21:20), the entire community was charged with protecting the well-being of a slave: “Murdering anybody is an attack on the godly nature of the whole of the human race, and in particular, that of the circle to which the victim

belonged...a slave has no relative to take up his cause...The community has to come forward as the avenger of the godly dignity of a human being which has been dragged in the dust in this case.”

Just as the community of Israel had a responsibility to protect and defend “the godly dignity” of a slave’s right to life in biblical times, the international community now has a responsibility to the citizens of Syria.

As the government of Bashar al Assad continues its attempts to brutally crush the protest movement in Syria, the United Nations is claiming that more than 5,000 people have died since Syria’s anti-government uprising began last March. According to [NPR](#), when a U.N. resolution calling for a peaceful transfer of power in Syria failed due to a veto by China and Russia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that “What happened yesterday at the United Nations was a travesty. Faced with a neutered Security Council, we have to redouble our efforts outside of the United Nations with those allies and partners who support the Syrian people’s right to have a better future.” [The New York Times](#) recently reported that Clinton “has proposed a ‘friends of democratic Syria’ group to support the opposition and work for a democratic political transition.” The U.S. must hold Syria accountable for its destructive behavior and fully implement sanctions as authorized under the Syria Accountability Act. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

The Torah demands that we not allow the blood of any human being to be spilled without taking action. Today, the lives of thousands of Syrian civilians hang in the balance. The world must flex its diplomatic muscle to protect and defend the Syrian people’s godly human dignity, before the cruel Assad regime murders any more innocent people. ■

The Power of Prevention

If a fire breaks out (Exodus 22:5)

כִּי תִצַּא אֵשׁ (שְׁמוֹת כב:ה)

Many of the laws of damages outlined in our *parashah* are based on the principle of personal responsibility, a basic tenet that underlies much of traditional Jewish tort law. In the language of the Talmud, *Adam mead l’olam*—“a person is always considered fully liable for his actions [and the damages he causes].” The Midrash (Mechilta) derives this principle by drawing a lesson from damaging fire described in the text (22:5). Once lit, fire seems to act on its own, and can inflict damage without additional human intervention. Yet, the person who kindled the fire must still pay for any damages in their entirety. As such, the Midrash states that “the verse comes to make the perpetrator of a coerced action [obligated to pay damages] as if he performed it willingly, and the perpetrator of an unintentional act [obligated to pay damages] as if he acted intentionally, obligating both men and women in all manner of damages in the Torah.”

Jewish law obligates one who causes damage to pay in full because costs inflicted as a result of human behavior are considered preventable. Today, an Israeli company has used this basic premise to develop technology that is saving lives by preventing automobile accidents.

According to studies carried out by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute and the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 93% of accidents are caused by driver error. Of those, 80% are caused by a lack of attention by the driver within three seconds of the accident. To help prevent these types of accidents, Jerusalem based Mobileye Products, a global leader in advanced driver assistance systems, has developed a technology that uses a single camera and sophisticated algorithms that, according to Mobileye CEO Isaac Litman, “can warn you of an impending accident so that you can take action in time and avert a collision.” Littman told the website [Israel21c](#) that “Now that vehicles fitted with our systems have traveled over a billion miles in the U.S., we’ve seen a 40-50 percent drop in accidents.” The new technology not only recognizes impending accidents and warns the driver, but can even stop the car should the driver fail to react quickly enough.

Tradition teaches that damages caused by human behavior are preventable, and we should certainly recognize that distracted driving is a dangerous activity that each of us must try to avoid. Yet, should we become distracted while driving, cars equipped with warning system technology developed in Israel can now grab our attention in time to prevent dangerous accidents from occurring. ■