



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 2, 2012

Parashat Vayechi

Dangerous Unity

I will divide them in Jacob (Genesis 49:7)

אחלקם ביעקב (בראשית מט:ז)

In his final prophetic message to his children, Jacob was explicit about the nature of Simeon and Levi: “Weapons of violence their kinship; Let my soul not come into their council...” (49:5-6). Most commentators explain that Jacob’s words were a reaction to the brothers’ violent destruction of the city of Shechem. Cursing their anger, Jacob decreed: “I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel” (49:7). Rashbam explains that this refers to the fact that when the Jewish people ultimately settled in Israel, Levi did not receive a portion of land along with the rest of the tribes. Instead, Levi settled in cities spread across the entirety of Israel. In this way, the brothers’ common attribute of anger was diluted so that it could not cause further damage to the Jewish nation.

Jacob recognized that when unity leads to violence, it must be prevented. The international community must keep this lesson in mind and not legitimize the reconciliation between Palestinian factions until all parties renounce violence.

Mohammed Shtayyeh, a member of the Fatah Central Committee and one of the Palestinian Authority (PA) negotiators with Israel, was quoted recently as saying that the Palestinians may cancel the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. The comments came less than 48 hours after Hamas and Islamic Jihad agreed to join a temporary leadership of the PLO that would prepare for new elections for the organization’s two key bodies—the Palestine National Council and Executive Committee. By reconciling with Hamas, the PA has chosen to break from its peace commitments with Israel, under which it is required to fight terror and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure represented by Hamas, among other groups. Incorporating an unreformed Hamas that has not foresworn terror would make it impossible for the PA to meet these commitments. As President Barack Obama [said](#) last year, an “agreement between Fatah and Hamas poses an enormous obstacle to peace. No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction.” For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

As Palestinian efforts to reconcile different factions continue, the international community must follow Jacob’s lead and not grant legitimacy to any government that includes violent groups committed to Israel’s destruction. ■

The Power of Relationships

And Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh (Genesis 50:4)

וידבר יוסף אל בית פרעה (בראשית נ:ד)

Joseph needed permission from the Pharaoh in order to leave Egypt and bury Jacob in the Cave of the Patriarchs. Yet, instead of approaching the king, we read that Joseph spoke to “the house of Pharaoh,” asking them to speak to the king on his behalf. Why didn’t Joseph approach the king directly? S’forno suggests that because he was still mourning for his father, Joseph could not enter the chamber of the king. Yet, Ohr Hachayim disagrees, explaining that while Joseph did approach the king on his own, he also asked the members of Pharaoh’s house to speak on his behalf. He did this “So that they would appease Pharaoh about this matter so that it would be done.” Ultimately, Joseph’s efforts succeeded, and he received permission to leave Egypt and bury his father.

In approaching members of Pharaoh's court for their assistance, Joseph demonstrated one of the myriad ways we can influence powerful people. We should follow Joseph's example as we continue our involvement in political activism and our work to educate elected officials about the importance of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

As we celebrate the first Shabbat of 2012, now is the perfect time to consider our resolutions for the coming year. What can we resolve to change that will truly have a lasting impact? During the coming year the United States will conduct presidential and congressional elections that will determine the future of our country for years to come. In election years, candidates rely on the energy of grassroots supporters—to make the phone calls, hang the signs, and lobby support on their behalf—that is so crucial to win elected office. And, after the election, those candidates will turn to the people who stood with them from the beginning for direction, council and advice. Because the issue of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship has long enjoyed broad bipartisan support, each and every one of us can confidently support a candidate with whom we most strongly identify, while also working to improve Israel's standing in the process. As we look to the year ahead, and all the change and new beginnings it will bring, let us resolve to get more politically involved. We will not only make the United States a better place, but we can also help Israel in the process. For more about how you can get involved, visit www.aipac.org/TakeAction.

By turning to people in Pharaoh's house for help, Joseph demonstrated the power of relationships to effect political decisions. We must model ourselves after Joseph, and work to strengthen and support the U.S.-Israel relationship. ■

Denying Jewish History

In the Cave of the Field of Machpelah (Genesis 50:13)

במערת שדה המכפלה (בראשית נ:יג)

The Midrash tells us that someone tried to prevent Joseph from burying Jacob in the Cave of the Patriarchs. However, there are different views as to who that person was. According to one version of the story (located in the Talmud, Tractate Sotah), Esau claimed that it was his right to be buried in the cave instead of his brother. Yalkut Meam Loez (on Bereishit Chapter 50, #42) notes that according to another Midrash, "The people of Chet came to complain [about the cave], for throughout all the years that Jacob was in Egypt they claimed dominion over the cave, as they considered it ownerless." According to this version of the story, Jacob was only able to be buried at the site after his son Naphtali returned to Egypt and retrieved the deed of sale.

Just as the people of Chet tried to deny Jacob's connection to the Cave of the Patriarchs long ago, today, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is similarly attempting to deny our ancient Jewish connection to this sacred place.

Over the Hanukkah holiday, [Reuters](#) reported that "Israeli archaeologists...had found a 2,000 year-old clay seal near Jerusalem's Western Wall, confirming written accounts of ritual practices in the biblical Jewish Temple." This impressive archaeological find represents powerful evidence connecting the Jewish people to our ancient homeland. However, at the same time the PA has taken steps to deny a Jewish connection to the Cave of the Patriarchs. According to [Agence France Presse](#), the Palestinians have undertaken a "campaign to claim heritage rights over an ancient burial cave in the heart of Hebron's Old City. Known to Muslims as the Ibrahimi Mosque and to Jews as the Cave of the Patriarchs, the landmark is venerated in both religions as the gravesite of the Biblical patriarch Abraham and his family. It is long claimed by both Israel and the Palestinians. But the row has extended to cultural rights, and looks set to end up before the U.N. cultural agency, UNESCO, which—in a diplomatic victory for Palestinians—just admitted them as a member despite stiff resistance from Israel and the United States." The Palestinians' successful effort to seek membership at UNESCO represents a blatant attempt to politicize the U.N. system and seek platforms to further attack Israel. For more on Palestinian efforts at the U.N., click [here](#).

The Midrash relates attempts to deny our historic connection to the Tomb of the Patriarchs. We now watch history repeats itself as the Palestinian Authority hopes to utilize its recent admission to the United Nations' cultural body to deny our ancient connection to the Cave of the Patriarchs. ■

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