

JULY 15, 2013

Parashat Va'etchanan

Guarding Life

Take therefore good heed unto yourselves (Deuteronomy 4:15) (ונשמרתם מאד לנפשותיכם (דברים ד:טו))

Jewish tradition has always emphasized the value of human life. While the verse “take therefore good heed unto yourselves” (4:15) is usually interpreted to refer to spiritual well-being, Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe in his *Levush* commentary on the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 116) writes, “these verses imply that a person must guard himself so as not to bring himself into a situation of danger...” Maimonides (Laws of Murder and Guarding the Soul Chapter 11) writes, “It is a positive *mitzvah* to remove any obstacle that could pose a danger to life, and to be very careful regarding these matters, as Deuteronomy 4:9 states: ‘Beware for yourself; and guard your soul.’”

Since Moses’ time Jewish law has placed a premium on protecting life. Recently, the state of Israel once again upheld this value not only for its own citizens, but by helping to save the lives of Syrians injured in the bloody civil war.

Although Israel and Syria are still officially at war, that status hasn’t prevented a number of injured Syrians from making their way across the border into Israel for treatment. And, when they arrive in Israel, they are afforded the very best life-saving treatments that Israel can offer them, irrespective of their identity and country of origin. According to [Israel21c](#), 50 to 100 victims of Syria’s bloody civil war have been admitted to Israeli hospitals for life-saving surgeries. Of those, 30 have been treated at the Ziv Medical Center in Safed. Dr. Amram Hadary, director of the trauma unit at Ziv said, “It’s our duty as a regional hospital, where we are located along the Lebanese border on one side and the Syrian border on the other side. We cannot ignore that the Syrian conflict is happening behind our door. We cannot close our eyes, ears and hearts to what is happening there.” Medical Center director Dr. Oscar Embon added that, “We treat patients regardless of religion, race, nationality, and give the best care we can provide. For me, they are human beings in need of treatment. I’m not thinking of them as enemies. I’m glad as a physician that we have the opportunity to exercise humanistic principles.” Throughout Israel’s history doctors have treated people regardless of their nationality, even if their country was at war with Israel. Ziv doctors cared for enemy soldiers and a Syrian pilot as far back as the 1982 Lebanon war. In addition, the IDF itself plays a role in the effort, having set up a field hospital on the border to treat victims. The IDF also grants special permission of entry to Israel for the critically injured, and escorts them to and from the hospital. For more on Syria, click [here](#).

Guided by Judaism’s principle of guarding human life, Israel remains committed to helping not only its friends but all the citizens of the world in times of need. ■

Remembering the Exodus

And you shall remember (Deuteronomy 5:14)

וזכרת (דברים ה:יד)

The Exodus from Egypt serves as the basis for a number of different traditional Jewish customs, including holidays (Sukkot and Passover), rituals (eating *matzah*, waving a *lulav*), and even *mitzvot* like keeping Shabbat. Egypt even appears in the first commandment—“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (5:6)—and Moses reminds us in the fourth commandment that when we observe Shabbat, “You shall remember that you were a

servant in the land of Egypt” (5:14). Moreover, in the traditional Friday night Kiddush we specifically note that the Shabbat itself is “a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt.”

The Exodus was so impactful that the Jewish people’s negative relationship with ancient Egypt is constantly a focus of our traditional religious practice. In contrast, the Jewish state and modern day Egypt have had a relatively positive relationship for the past 30 years.

Since the signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979, Egypt—the most populous and powerful Arab nation—has been the key U.S. strategic ally in the Arab world. Although the peace with Israel has been cold, Cairo has adhered to its main treaty commitments: full diplomatic relations; keeping the Sinai as a demilitarized buffer zone; permitting the presence in the Sinai of the U.S.-led Multinational Force and Observers; and maintaining freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal even for Israeli warships. Most importantly, the Egyptian-Israeli border has remained quiet. With Egypt at peace with Israel, no Arab army has attacked Israel since 1979. Over the past several weeks, the world witnessed the results of Mohammad Morsi’s removal from office and the appointment of an interim president by the Egyptian military. Between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian military, the United States has not taken a side but regardless of who emerges as the victor, the leadership in Egypt must remain at peace with the Jewish state. As Egypt moves forward with its new government, the United States has made clear that it will judge Egypt’s leadership by their actions, including stability along Egypt’s border with Israel. For more on Egypt, click [here](#).

Just as our customs stress the importance of our ancient relationship with Egypt, we must stress the importance of maintaining a stable Israel-Egypt border for the future. ■

The Eternal Jewish City (Shabbat Nachamu)

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem (Isaiah 40:2)

דברו על לב ירושלים (ישעיהו מ:ב)

Shabbat of Consolation is named for the first words of the *haphtarah* traditionally read on this Shabbat. This reading marks the first of seven readings of consolation, which foretold the redemption of Jerusalem following the destruction of the First Temple. Yet, when Isaiah said “Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her,” (40:2) what did he mean? How do you console a city? Ibn Ezra (on 40:2) explains that Jerusalem here “refers to *knesset* (the congregation of) Israel.”

By referring to all of the Israelites as Jerusalem, Isaiah emphasized that even in his era the city carried special, deep meaning for the Jewish nation. In modern times Jerusalem continues to be a place whose significance to the Jewish people is unparalleled.

For more than three millennia, Jerusalem has played a central role in the lives of Jews throughout the world. Jews have maintained a continuous presence in Jerusalem for 3,000 years, and there are nearly 850 mentions of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible, and literally thousands of references to the city throughout more than 2,000 years of rabbinic literature. Moreover, since the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., generations of dispersed Jews have prayed three times a day for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and their return to it, and fasted on Tisha B’av yearning for a return to Judaism’s holiest city. Between 1948 to 1967, Jordan denied any access to Israeli Jews to the Old City or the Western Wall. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel immediately abolished the restrictions on access to the city and guaranteed open access to Jerusalem’s holy sites for worshippers and tourists of all nationalities and religions allowing people from all faiths to worship at their holy places. Today, Christians, Muslims and Jews from all over the world can visit the holy sites in a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty, and all Christian, Muslim and Jewish holy sites are protected by Israeli law. For more on Jerusalem, click [here](#).

For 2,000 years we mourned and hoped for the city which represented the essence of the Jewish people. Today we celebrate the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of consolation, secure in the knowledge that Jerusalem is once again the eternal, undivided capital of the Jewish state. ■

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