



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 5, 2013

Parashat Shoftim

Voicing our Support

Judges and officers you shall place for you (Deuteronomy 16:18) (דברים טז:יח)

Moses instructed the Jewish people to appoint judges and officers specifically “for you.” What do these two words add? Rabbi Avram Bogupolsky explains that we often need the voice of outsiders to guide us. “It is the judges, the officers and the like who keep us doing what we are supposed to do...We can’t judge ourselves because we are too close to the situation...Only an outsider looking in can be objective.” In the next verse (16:19) we read, “You shall not wrest judgment.” Writes Rabbi Bogupolsky, “[This] is also a warning to the judge within ourselves. It is easy for us to alter judgment by rationalizing why we should or should not do something.”

The officers and judges served as a third party to ensure that the Jewish people stayed course. This lesson reminds us that we can serve as an important voice as we urge Congress to remain committed to the state of Israel.

In 2007, the United States signed a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining America’s commitment to assist the state of Israel deal with evolving military and security threats, and ensure Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME) over potential adversaries. While the agreement committed the U.S. to \$3.1 billion in aid for fiscal year 2013, across-the-board cuts in the budget led to a reduction of \$155 million in security assistance for Israel in that fiscal year. In this period of enormous unrest in the Middle East, it is critical that the United States continues its aid commitment to Israel. As our one reliable Mideast ally, Israel serves critical U.S. national security objectives. U.S. aid is particularly important this year as Israel faces new military threats, growing defense costs and mounting regional uncertainty. If anything, Israel’s defense needs are growing, not shrinking, and the across-the-board cut mandated last year by sequestration has made it harder for Israel to meet those needs. Israel already spends a greater percentage of its GDP on defense than any other Western country. In light of the situation in Egypt and Syria, Israel has had to spend additional resources securing its borders. A robust foreign aid budget enables Washington to support key allies like Israel, undergird America’s diplomatic efforts, spur job-creating exports and help prevent unstable areas from becoming breeding grounds for terror. We must continue to remind our Members of Congress of the importance of aid to Israel and support assistance in fiscal year 2014. For more on how to take action, click [here](#).

Moses stressed that a strong outside voice can remind us to keep our commitments. We must serve as that voice as we encourage Congress to keep its commitment and support full security assistance to the Jewish state. ■

Foundation of Justice

Justice, justice shall you follow (Deuteronomy 16:20)

צדק צדק תרדוף (דברים טז:כ)

A fundamental foundation of every fair modern society is equality—an idea that stems directly from Parshat Shoftim. Moses instructed the judges to pursue “Justice, justice” and reject bribery, favoritism and other examples of perversions of the law so that “you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you” (16:20). What is the connection between judging fairly and living in the Land? Rashi (on 16:2) explains that “the appointment of appropriate judges is a worthwhile reason to sustain Israel and place them in the Land.”

Just as the Jewish nation was established thousands of years ago based on the foundations of justice and fairness, the modern state of Israel was similarly established with a dedication to freedom, fairness, and justice for all.

Israel's Declaration of Independence proclaims many of the same democratic principles that the United States adheres to including "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..." In Israel, civil rights are guaranteed by law and guarded by numerous private organizations and citizens action groups that often openly challenge the government. Israel is considered to be the most advanced and tolerant country in the Middle East on such matters as the guarantee of a fair trial and the protection of minority rights. Israel is also the leading nation in the region in the protection of gay rights, with strong anti-discrimination laws, and Israel maintains an independent judicial and court system. In Israel, nobody is above the law, and Israeli law guarantees fairness and equality even for those who wish to do harm to Israel's citizens. As far back as 1987, then U.S. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan [said](#) that despite the difficulties in safeguarding civil liberties during times of security crises, "it may well be Israel, not the United States, that provides the best hope for building a jurisprudence that can protect civil liberties against the demands of national security." For more on Israel today, click [here](#).

Justice represents the basis for the establishment of the Jewish nation. Moses promised that justice would serve as the basis for Israel's blessing and success in the Holy Land. Today, Israel maintains loyal to this fundamental principle, serving as a beacon of freedom and fairness in the Middle East. ■

Pursuing Peace

Proclaim peace unto it (Deuteronomy 20:10)

וקראת אליה לשלום (דברים כ"י)

Moses instructed the nation that when facing a military engagement with an adversary, the nation should first "proclaim peace," and attempt to avoid armed conflict. While many commentaries explain this instruction to refer to optional wars (and not the wars against the seven nations during the conquest of the Land of Israel), Nachmanides (on 20:2) understands that Moses' instruction applied to all potential military engagements. "For they are obligated to reach out in peace even to the seven nations...for Moses [himself] reached out in peace to Sichon the King of the Emorites." Even during the conquest of the Land of Israel, the Jewish nation always extended a hand in peace.

According to Nachmanides, the Jewish nation must reach out in peace in an attempt to avoid military confrontation. Today, Israel remains committed to this value, extending itself to the Palestinians in the hopes of reaching an accord.

Living up to its commitment to make "painful compromises" for the sake of peace, Israel's cabinet recently approved the conditional release of 104 Palestinian prisoners, paving the way for the resumption of peace talks with the Palestinian Authority, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported. "This moment is not easy for me," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said. "It is not easy for the ministers. It is not easy especially for the families, the bereaved families, whose hearts I understand. But there are moments in which tough decisions must be made for the good of the country and this is one of those moments." Secretary of State John Kerry said that the goal of negotiations is a comprehensive peace agreement leading to an independent Palestinian state within nine months, according to [The New York Times](#). Kerry and the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden at the White House for almost 30 minutes. White House spokesman Jay Carney said that Obama used the opportunity "to convey his appreciation to both sides for the leadership and courage they have shown in coming to the table." Still, the Palestinians have yet to demonstrate a similar willingness to make difficult compromises as well. Speaking to journalists in Cairo, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decreed that "in a final resolution, we would not see the presence of a single Israeli—civilian or soldier—on our lands," [Reuters](#) reported.

Since Biblical times, the nation of Israel has placed a premium on peace, reaching out in the hopes of avoiding armed conflict. While Israel has taken concrete steps to demonstrate its commitment to peace, the Palestinians must demonstrate their readiness to make similar concessions for the sake of lasting peace. ■