



Sermon Tidbits

SEPTEMBER 23, 2013

Shemini Atzeret - Bereishit

A Symbol of Self-Reliance

I made the Israelite people live in booths (Leviticus 23:43) (ויקרא כג:מג) כי בסכות הושבת את בני ישראל

We are commanded to sit in the *sukkah* so that “future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 23:43). The Talmud (Sukkah 11b) relates a well-known debate: Rabbi Eliezer explains that this verse alludes not to booths, but to the clouds of glory which protected the nation in the desert. Rabbi Akiva argues that the verse alludes not to miraculous clouds, but instead to actual booths. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch writes that “the more muted view of R. Akiva...downplays the magnitude of the miracle. The booths were the products of human endeavor, reflecting a degree of self-reliance...R. Akiva construed the trek through the wilderness as a training camp for independence, war and self-government.”

According to Rabbi Akiva the *sukkah* reminds us that even in the desert we began the process of transformation into a self-reliant nation. Today, the ever-increasing threats against Israel highlight the critical importance of self-reliance.

In recent remarks to the Cabinet of the Knesset, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu focused on Iran’s progress in its pursuit of nuclear weapons and the lessons Israel had drawn from the recent diplomatic process surrounding the chemical weapons in Syria. According to [The New York Times](#), Netanyahu highlighted the need for Israel’s self-reliance. Netanyahu quoted the ancient Jewish scholar Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” The Israeli Prime Minister continued, “The operational translation of this rule is that Israel should always be able to defend itself and will protect itself by its own strengths against every threat.” The United States has long supported Israel in this goal. A major objective of U.S. foreign aid to Israel has been to maintain the Jewish state’s “qualitative military edge,” defined by Congress as Israel’s “ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors.” Direct U.S. security assistance provided in the annual foreign aid bill is the most tangible way that the U.S. ensures Israel’s qualitative military edge. For more on aid to Israel, click [here](#).

Rabbi Akiva emphasized the *sukkah* as a symbol of self-reliance. In this light, as we sit in the *sukkah*, we must also do all we can to ensure that Israel has the strength, fortitude and support necessary to protect and defend itself. ■

The Blessing of Water (Shemini Atzeret)

The Sukkah of peace (Shabbat Prayer)

סוכת שלום (תפילת שבת)

The Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:2) teaches us that while individuals are judged on Rosh Hashanah, “on the holiday [of Sukkot], we are judged regarding water.” For this reason, many of the rituals of Sukkot relate to our hopes and prayers for an abundant and rainy winter season. Many communities celebrate a Simchat Beit Hashoeva—the Joy of the House of Pouring—during the intermediate days, commemorating the ritual of pouring water practiced in the ancient Temple as a prayer for rain. On the seventh day of Sukkot, we wave the *aravah* (willow branch), chosen for its propensity to grow near rivers and streams. Finally, on Shemini Atzeret we traditionally recite the prayer for rain, and insert into the Amidah an allusion to God as “He who makes the wind blow...and the rain descend.”

On Sukkot we focus our prayers on the need for water especially in the Land of Israel. We can also note the accomplishment of an Israeli company that has bolstered water supplies not only for Israel, but also for the world.

In the Negev desert in 1965, members of Kibbutz Hatzertim teamed with an engineer who discovered that a slow and balanced supply of water improves plant growth and also conserves vast quantities of fresh water. This discovery proved crucial to Israel's growth into an agricultural world leader. At the recent annual World Water Week, 200 groups from around the world gathered to discuss water policy. The Stockholm International Water Institute, which provides assistance and advice on water management, climate issues, and water economics, awarded the 2013 Stockholm Industry Water Award to Netafim—the Israeli company that pioneered the system of drip-irrigation that has become the industry standard worldwide. According to [The Times of Israel](#), Netafim was chosen by the organization for its decades of work in helping farmers more efficiently utilize their water supply. They were also awarded for their expert training, capacity building, and knowledge transfer in cooperation with local organizations to help farmers in developing countries maximize yields with existing resources. In places like Niger and India, the company has trained tens of thousands of farmers to use their products effectively, enabling farmers to reduce waste and increase their incomes by 20 percent over three years. For more on Israel's achievements, click [here](#).

As we pray for rain and water during Shemini Atzeret, we can also be thankful that for almost 50 years, Israeli water conservation innovations have been bringing the blessing of water to farmers and communities everywhere. ■

Speaking Out Against Evil (Bereishit)

The wickedness of man was great in the earth (Genesis 6:5)

רבה רעת האדם בארץ (בראשית ו:ה)

The divine decision to destroy mankind with the flood in Noah's time came after it was clear that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). Yet, were there not any honest and righteous people whose merit could save the world? After all, Abraham later demonstrated that the merit of even a small group of people could save a far larger group (see Genesis 18:20-33). Why didn't this happen before the flood? Rabbi Issac Shmelkis, in his commentary on the Torah Beit Yitzchak, writes that one of the factors that caused the Shechinah to depart from the world was the fact that "the righteous did not rebuke [the perpetrators of evil]."

One of the factors that sealed the fate of the wicked generation of the flood was the unwillingness of the righteous to protest the evil they witnessed. We cannot make this same mistake and remain silent in the face of evil today.

After the world witnessed the horrifying results of the chemical weapons attack that killed more than 1,000 civilians in Syria, including hundreds of women and children, the United States could no longer remain silent. As President Barack Obama noted in his [address to the nation](#) earlier this month, "When dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory." Moreover, had the world failed to intervene, other regimes—including other dictators and radical terrorist groups—would have seen that failure as a green light to use weapons of mass destruction without fear of repercussion. The President noted that "a failure to stand against the use of chemical weapons would weaken prohibitions against other weapons of mass destruction and embolden Assad's ally, Iran, which must decide whether to ignore international law by building a nuclear weapon or to take a more peaceful path." The international community, backed by the credible threat of attack, coerced Syria to not only finally formally admit that it possesses chemical weapons, but also to agree to hand over those weapons for disposal. Abraham Joshua Heschel wisely noted that, "indifference to evil is worse than evil itself...in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." The world cannot tolerate the use of unconventional weapons. We must do everything in our power to prevent any state—be it Syria or Iran—from employing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. For more on Syria click [here](#) and for more on Iran visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

As mankind descended into depravity, the failure of the righteous to speak out sealed the world's fate. We cannot make the same mistake, and must speak out to prevent despots from acquiring deadly weapons of mass destruction. ■

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