

APRIL 28, 2014

Parashat Emor

The Wrong Associates

Speak to the priests (Leviticus 21:1)

אמור אל הכהנים (ויקרא כא:א)

The priests were commanded to maintain a level of sanctity and separation from the rest of the nation. The Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 56b) notes that the priestly clan of Bilgah was punished for the actions of a single member of the family who blasphemed God in the Temple. Why was an entire clan punished for the actions of one person? “Abaya answered, ‘Woe is to the wicked, woe is to his neighbor.’” This individual was undoubtedly affected by those closest to her, and they therefore shared in her punishment. Maimonides (Laws of Attitudes, 6:1) writes, “It is natural for a person’s character and actions to be influenced by their friends and associates and for them to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, one should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, one should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds.” As the Mexican proverb teaches us, “Tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are.”

The commandment to the priests to remain separate from the people reminds us that we are all influenced by, and judged by the company that we keep, an adage that the United States must now reinforce to the Palestinian leadership.

Last week, “Rival Palestinian political factions Fatah and Hamas announced that after a seven-year split, they had reached a reconciliation deal that could see the formation of a unified Palestinian government by the end of May,” the [Washington Post](#) reported. Hamas, which is designated by the United States, Israel and the European Union as a terrorist group, rejects Israel’s right to exist and actively seeks its destruction. As its 1988 charter establishes, Hamas believes the complete annihilation of Israel can be the only resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In response to the announcement, “Israel cancelled a planned meeting with Palestinian officials over extending [ongoing peace] negotiations,” the [Jerusalem Post](#) reported.

Following the announcement of the Palestinians’ accord, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Abbas must choose between reaching peace with Israel or making an accord with ‘a murderous terror organization.’ “This evening as peace talks were about to take place, Abbas chose Hamas and not peace,” read a statement released by Netanyahu’s office. “Whoever chooses Hamas does not want peace.” Finance Minister Yair Lapid wondered, “How can they want to reach an agreement with us while signing an agreement with people who swear to kill us?” while Minister of Economy Naftali Bennett said that, “The agreement between Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad brings the Middle East to a new diplomatic era. The Palestinian Authority turned into the largest terrorist organization in the world, 20 minutes from Tel Aviv.” U.S. State Department Spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters, “It’s hard to see how Israel can be expected to sit down and negotiate with a group that denies its right to exist.”

The separation of the priests reminds us of that we are judged by the company which we keep. If Fatah chooses to consummate this relationship and associate with terrorists and murderers, the world must judge it by its actions – and act accordingly. ■

The Ultimate Sanctification – Yom Hazikaron

I will be sanctified among the children of Israel (Leviticus 22:32) (ויקרא כב:לב)

Commenting on the word, “I will be sanctified,” Rashi explains that this implies a requirement that every Jew, “Surrender your life and sanctify my name. I might think that this applies when one is alone; but Scripture states, ‘among the Children of Israel.’ And when he surrenders his life, he shall surrender it with the intention of dying, for whoever surrenders his life in anticipation of a miracle – a miracle is not performed for him.” This comment of Rashi has served as a guidepost for millions of Jews who died “*al kiddush Hashem*” – in the sanctification of God’s name, rather than abandon their faith and their people. Today we also use this same term to refer to those who have sanctified God’s name by giving their lives on behalf of, and for the sake of, the State of Israel.

On Yom Hazikaron, Israel’s Memorial Day, the State of Israel and Jews around the world pause and mark the loss of the more than twenty-three thousand Jews and Israelis who fought and died protecting and defending the Jewish State. Over the course of the day, in addition to two periods of silence during which sirens blare across the Jewish State, citizens participate in ceremonies, recite the *El Malei* prayer for the departed, and spend the day visiting the graves of fallen soldiers, friends and loved-ones. Yet, Rashi’s chilling message carries additional meaning today. For centuries, Jews made the ultimate sacrifice suffering the evils of pogrom and persecution. Today, while we still suffer the bitter sting of loss, the fallen died fighting for their state and on behalf of the right of the Jewish people to live and protect a Land of their own. And, while the brave soldiers and citizens who gave their lives certainly expected no miraculous salvation, their sacrifice, made “among the Children of Israel”, did indeed produce a miracle: the birth of a strong, independent Jewish State. ■

Giving Thanks for Great Blessings – Yom Ha’atzmaut

When you come into the land (Leviticus 23:10)

כי תבאו אל הארץ (ויקרא כג:י)

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 28:4), noting that the Torah introduces the commandment to bring the Omer offering of the first barley harvest in the Temple with the words “when you come into the Land”, explains that, “Israel merited to inherit the Land in the merit of the fulfillment of the Omer offering.” Why is this mitzvah so significant that through it we merit to inherit the Promised Land? The Chinuch (commandment 272) explains that this offering represents a sign of our collective thanks “for the great kindness of the Holy One...to renew for the people each year grain for sustenance.” When we express our thanks and gratitude, we justify the renewal of the blessings we enjoy.

Just as we were commanded to give thanks for the blessings of a new harvest each year, we must also give thanks for the blessing of a prosperous, growing Jewish State, as we mark Israel’s sixty-sixth Independence Day.

For nearly 3,000 years the land of Israel has been the heart, the soul, and the foundation of the Jewish people—the homeland from where its ancient traditions, culture and values have emanated. Since it was reestablished as a modern state in 1948, Israel has emerged as America’s most important strategic ally in the Middle East, a beacon of democracy, freedom and the rule of law, and a technological marvel that is one of the world leaders in science and innovation. And, it has achieved these incredible gains while facing seemingly insurmountable odds throughout its entire history. From its hostile neighbors to its vast desert terrain to its unique demographic make-up, the Jewish state has overcome countless obstacles and emerged as a light unto the nations. This week as we mark Israel’s Independence Day, Yom Ha’atzmaut, we give thanks for the great blessings that emanate from the Jewish State and continue to grow each year. At the same time, we rededicate ourselves to the important work of strengthening the great friendship between the United States and Israel, which helps ensure that these blessings continue.

The Omer offering represented a symbol of thanks for the blessings of a bountiful crop after a long winter of hard work. Yom Ha’atzmaut reminds us to give thanks and enjoy the blessings of a safe and secure Israel that we can never take for granted. ■