

JULY 21, 2014

Parashat Masei

Concluding with Good News

When he died in Mount Hor (Numbers 33:39)

במתו בהר החר (במדבר לג:לט)

While verse 39 notes that Aaron died on Mount Hor, in the previous verse (38) we read, “And Aaron the priest went up onto Mount Hor at the commandment of the Lord and died there.” Why repeat the location of Aaron’s death again in the very next verse? Rabbi Menachem Becker (see Parparaot L’Torah, vol. 4 p. 256) explains that because the verse concludes a paragraph in the Torah, it is best not to end it with a negative idea (the death of Aaron). For this reason, the text added the additional words of “on Mount Hor” in verse 39. Rabbi Becker notes the importance of this message in daily life, “We must try to avoid concluding our discussions with negative news or a sad outlook, which leaves the listener with a bad taste. Rather, we should conclude discussions with words of encouragement and hope.”

Just as the Torah avoids ending a paragraph on a negative note, we too, especially with all of the recent troubling news from Israel, must also make an effort to focus on the extraordinary aspects of the Jewish state.

From the kidnapping of the three Jewish youths, the subsequent news of their murder, the brutal killing of an Arab teen, to the ongoing rocket fire and ground operations in Gaza, the headlines from the Jewish state have troubled us for weeks. Yet, daily life continues, and the people of Israel have accomplished incredible achievements even during this time of war. Over the past month Israeli companies announced new medical achievements, including [tiny propellers which can steer medicine to cells](#), [non-invasive treatments for artery functions](#), and even a [clue which may lead to a cure for Alzheimer’s disease](#). These innovations may not make the headlines nor grab our attention, but we can and should focus on the good that exists each and every day in Israel.

Just as the Torah emphasized “finishing with the good”, we too, after expressing our concern for the troubling news, must also “conclude with the good” and emphasize the achievements of Israel that happen each and every day. ■

Extensive Efforts to Protect Human Life

And the congregation shall save the manslayer (Numbers 35:25)

והצלו העד את הרצח (במדבר לה:כה)

Through the establishment of the Cities of Refuge, the Torah protects the accidental killer—who killed someone due to his own negligence and inattention—from any act of vengeance that might be perpetrated by a “blood avenger.” The extensive network of six cities offered refuge where the accidental killer could find protection from a relative seeking vengeance for the accidental death. Commenting on the elaborate instructions for these cities of refuge, Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch in his Da’at Sofrim commentary (on Joshua 20:2) writes, “The designation of these cities served as an announcement of the prohibition of striking a fellow human being”—even one who is killed accidentally.

Just as God instructed Moses to take extensive measures in order to protect human life, Israel has taken extraordinary measures to protect the lives of civilians in Gaza who are being brutally exploited by Hamas.

From the onset of hostilities on July 6, Hamas has fired more than 1,750 rockets at civilian targets in Israel, hoping to kill and injure as many innocent Israeli civilians as possible. Yet, Israel goes to great lengths to reduce and minimize

the horrendous harm caused to Gazan civilians. To protect civilian lives, the IDF uses a stringent target selection criteria and warning procedures, such as phone calls, text messages, leaflets and the firing of warning shots to alert residents about impending strikes. In addition, IDF pilots have [aborted bombing runs](#) to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. According to a [United Nations document](#), “In most cases [of civilian death], prior to the attacks, residents have been warned to leave, either via phone calls by the Israel military or by the firing of warning missiles.” Civilian casualties in Gaza, while tragic, result directly from Hamas’ tactic of using the civilian population as human shields. Hamas commits a double war crime—they are deliberately targeting Israeli civilians and also embedding its weapons, militants, operatives and infrastructures in the midst of uninvolved Palestinian civilians. Even as Israel initiated ground operations aimed at rooting out terrorist tunnels following ten days of Hamas attacks by land, air and sea, and after repeated rejections of offers to deescalate the situation, the IDF continues to take every precaution to protect Palestinian civilians.

Tragically, it falls on Israel to protect the lives of the Palestinians who Hamas endangers. Despite the risks and challenges, we are commanded to value human life, and take extraordinary measures to protect it, even if Hamas won’t. ■

A Bad Deal

So you shall not pollute the land (Numbers 35:33)

ולא תחניפו את הארץ (במדבר לה:לג)

We are prohibited from allowing a killer to pay a ransom to avoid punishment, *v’lo tachnifu*—“so you shall not pollute the Land.” How does accepting a bribe pollute the land? Kli Yakkar (verse 33) explains that the term means “do not corrupt the land.” When a murderer feeds the earth his prey, he expects to reap riches and power due to his wicked act. If we permit him to benefit from his evil acts, we have corrupted the land. Kli Yakkar writes, “For anyone who gives something to someone who is not worthy of it in order to receive something [smaller] in return- this is called *chanufah*.”

According to Kli Yakkar, we may not give benefit to the unworthy in order to receive a smaller benefit in return. The United States must keep this principle in mind during the ongoing negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.

Negotiators from Iran and the P5+1 agreed last Friday to extend talks over the country’s contested nuclear activities through late November, hoping to secure a deal that would prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon and ease economic sanctions that have hobbled the oil-rich Islamic republic, [The Washington Post](#) reported. “There are still significant gaps on some core issues which will require more time and effort,” European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a joint statement. Iran’s intransigence has led some to fear that the United States might reach an agreement to ease Iran’s biting economic sanctions, yet not require that Iran fully dismantle its nuclear program. From the outset there has been concern that Iran would drag out talks to improve its position, and Tehran has actually enjoyed some economic improvement as a result of sanctions relief in the Joint Plan of Action. In addition, during the last six months Iran has continued both enriching uranium and conducting research and development on advanced centrifuges. The Administration and Congress must make it clear to Tehran that America’s patience with diplomacy is not infinite. And the Administration should begin immediate substantive consultations with Congress concerning what an acceptable final nuclear agreement must include.

According to Kli Yakkar, the prohibition of *chanifah* precludes us from giving something to an unworthy individual in order to receive something smaller in return. Easing economic sanctions on Iran without shutting down its nuclear program would be just that. It would also be a bad deal for the United States and the rest of the world. ■

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