

APRIL 27, 2015

Parashat Achrei-Mot Kedoshim

Encouraging Cheating

Nor put a stumbling-block before the blind (Leviticus 19:14) (ולפני עור לא תתן מכשול (ויקרא יט:יד))

In the fall of 2012, all 279 students in Harvard University's "Introduction to Congress" course found themselves embroiled in the [largest cheating scandal in Ivy League history](#). Ultimately, dozens were forced to leave the school. Why would they cheat? Professor Dan Ariely of Duke University, a recognized expert on cheating, suggested that the student's behavior may have stemmed from the undefined rules of the take-home. He [writes](#), "In general, lack of clarity in expectations is a great instigator of dishonesty, after all, when no one tells you what you can and can't do, it becomes much easier to decide for yourself what probably is and isn't okay." In other words, putting otherwise honest people in an ambiguous situation where they can cheat may encourage them to do just that.

The Torah prohibits us from taking any action that can encourage someone to sin. The term Judaism has coined for putting people in these challenging situations is "*lifnei iver*," based on the verse, "nor [shall you] put a stumbling-block before the blind." (19:14) In its simplest form this refers to a baseless, wicked act. Yet, the Sages expanded this prohibition to include other actions as well. "This [injunction also] refers to someone who is blind about a specific manner...If someone comes to you for advice, do not give him inappropriate counsel; do not tell him [that the item is] kosher when it is invalid... (Sifra Kedoshim 2:14) Maimonides (Laws of Murder 12:14) expands the prohibition even further writing that, "Anyone who strengthens the hands of a sinner about which he is blind and does not see the truth because of the desires of his heart—this person violates a negative commandment..." We are forbidden from creating a situation that strengthens the hand of a sinner making it easier for him to sin. It's wrong to tempt the Nazarite (sworn from wine)—or the alcoholic—with a tasty glass of wine, telling them, "Why not? It's only one drink." (Pesachim 22b) And it's wrong to give Iran—a country with a long track record of cheating—the means and opportunity to cheat on the agreement to curb its nuclear program.

Last week, the Obama administration [indicated a willingness](#) to consider dramatic immediate sanctions relief if Iran signs a final nuclear agreement. Yet, Iran has a long history of lying, cheating, and failing to uphold its agreements with the international community. Moreover, Iran has already suggested that it would be unwilling to accept inspection of its military sites. President Obama said that, "We can envision a comprehensive agreement that involves extraordinary constraints and verification mechanisms and intrusive inspections, but that permits Iran to have a peaceful nuclear program," Iran seems to have a different view. According to the [Associated Press](#), Gen. Hossein Salami, a senior commander in the Revolutionary Guard, said that "International nuclear inspectors will be barred from all Iranian military sites under any deal with world powers. We will respond with hot lead (bullets) to those who speak of it. Iran will not become a paradise for spies. We will not roll out the red carpet for the enemy." Combined with Iranian intransigence, the administration's current position will provide Iran with extensive and rapid sanctions relief, while enabling it to retain virtually its entire nuclear infrastructure.

This is precisely why congressional oversight is so critical to the final Iran deal. Congress must ensure that any deal with Iran includes clear, strict guidelines that preclude the possibility of Iran cheating on the deal. Anything less would not only be imprudent. It would represent a tacit encouragement of Iran to continue cheating—a clear violation of the prohibition of *lifnei iver*. ■

A Nation of Lovers

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18)

ואהבת לרעך כמוך (ויקרא יט:יח)

When the daughter of Ismail Haniyah—the terrorist Hamas leader—fell gravely ill last year, she was [quietly transferred into Israel for treatment](#) at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv. While Israelis noted the irony of treating the daughter of a terrorist sworn to their destruction and the wanton murder of civilians, they did not react especially poorly to the news, for Israel has been taking similar steps for years. Israel has [transported injured Syrians to Israeli medical centers](#) for life-saving treatments, and also routinely facilitates the [transfer of Gazans into Israel](#) for medical purposes. Even as Hamas rockets rained down on Israel's cities and towns last year, Israel built a special medical facility to treat Gazans injured during hostilities. Why does the Jewish state take these unusual steps? It does so because the ethic of caring for others is ingrained into our national consciousness.

According to many commentaries, the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” which Rabbi Akiva calls the “great rule in the Torah” (see Rashi on 19:18), not only includes the stranger in your midst. (see 19:34—“The stranger...you shall love him as yourself...”) Rather, the verse commands us to love all of humanity created in God's image. Eighteenth-century German commentator Naftali Herz Wessely wrote that the words “as yourself” refers to one who is, “Similar to you...for he also was created in the image of God. This [commandment] includes all of humanity, for everyone was created in the image [of God].” We help others in need because we have always been commanded to love every human being and help them as we ourselves would want to be helped—no matter which country or group that sick or injured person happens to come from. ■

Planting Trees for Future Generations

And you shall plant all manner of trees for food (Leviticus 19:23)

ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל (ויקרא יט:כג)

The Sages in the Midrash (Tanchuma Yashan Kedoshim 12) wonder why the Torah needs to command us to plant trees. Would we not plant trees on our own? “Said the Holy One to [the Children of] Israel: Even though you will find [the Land] filled with goodness, you shall not say ‘Let us sit and not plant.’ Rather, be careful to plant [with alacrity]. Just as you entered [the Land] and found trees planted by others, so too you shall plant for your children...” As we enjoy the beautiful trees and amazing blessings that adorn the land of Israel today, we must continue to plant seeds for the future.

Today, the words of the Midrash are often interpreted literally, for Israel is one of only [two countries in the world](#) that entered the 21st century with a net gain instead of a net loss in its number of trees. Additionally, the words of the Sages also encourage and exhort us to continue to work at and build on the amazing growth we have witnessed in Israel over the past 67 years. According to the [website Israel21c](#), Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics reported in its annual Independence Day report that from a 1948 population of 806,000, today Israel's population stands at 8,345,000—a tenfold increase. Even more incredible is Israel's economic growth. Israel's Ministry of Economy reported that Israeli exports from industry have soared from \$5 million in 1948 to \$47 billion, and the number of production plants has also jumped since the Jewish state's establishment from around 2,300 factories in 1948 to 124,000 today. Yet, even with all of Israel's success we know that we cannot stop building our country. We must continue to buy products from Israel and support Israeli businesses and entrepreneurs. We must encourage American businesses to continue to make the financially wise decision to invest in Israel. Finally, we must continue the [critical political work we do each and every day](#) that will prevent adversaries of the Jewish state from causing financial harm through misguided economic efforts such as boycotts and sanctions. While the Jewish people enjoy the beautiful trees of modern Israel, we must continue to plant to ensure that our children—and their children, enjoy the fruits of those trees for many years in the future. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.