

MAY 11, 2015

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai

The Danger of Self-Deception

And you shall not wrong one another (Leviticus 25:17)

ולא תוננו איש את עמיתו (ויקרא כה:יז)

We all lie to ourselves, far more often than we imagine. We probably did it this morning, looking in the mirror as we prepared to come to services. Somehow, when we looked in the mirror, we found the most flattering possible angle and perspective. We told ourselves that this is how everyone else sees us, all the time! But then someone shares a group photo on Facebook, we look at the picture and think, “I look like that?” Often, this type of self-deception can be harmless. So we don’t all look like just like models. That’s just fine. But other times, self-deception can be damaging and dangerous, bringing harm to ourselves and those around us.

We all know that Judaism forbids harmful speech—*lashon hara*. Yet, the Torah prohibits another type of harmful speech. Commenting on the verse “and you shall not wrong (*tonu*) one-another Rashi comments, “Here Scripture is warning against wronging verbally (*ona’at devarim*), namely, that one must not provoke his fellow [Jew], nor may one offer advice to him that is unsound for him, but according to the mode of life or the benefit of the advisor.” Not only may we not insult, denigrate or gossip about others; we also may not lie to them, tell half-truths, and mislead them by giving them bad or incomplete advice. Many Hasidic masters took this rule one step further. Not only may we not mislead others, the Torah also enjoins us from misleading ourselves. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Varki used to say, “The law is that one may not ‘wrong another.’ But going beyond the letter of the law requires that he also does not wrong himself.” The Kotzker Rebbe made a play on words to make the same point. Commenting on the verse, “You shall not wrong one-another (*amito*—עמיתו),” he said that the verse means that a person should also not wrong אמתו—“his truth.” Just as we may not lie to others, we also may not lie to ourselves.

While self-delusions about hairlines and clothing are harmless, fooling ourselves about real problems—personal issues, communal issues, and even national issues—is a very dangerous mistake that can have catastrophic consequences. It is precisely this possibility that worries many Americans about the proposed agreement with Iran. The danger of Iran’s nuclear program is only half the story. Aside from its nuclear program, Tehran is perhaps the greatest and most dangerous state sponsor of global terrorism, and has been working for many years to dominate and spread radical Islam across the Middle East. Iran deploys its military and employs terrorism to expand its control over increasingly large regions of the Middle East, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and possibly Yemen. Iran supplied not only the thousands of rockets Hezbollah currently points at Israel’s north, but also supports both financially and militarily Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

What do we imagine that Iran will do with the billions of dollars of economic benefit they will gain after the world eases sanctions? This isn’t about making peace with enemies; it’s about recognizing the truth about the people sitting across the table, and whether any agreement has the possibility of bringing greater peace and stability to the world. Voltaire wrote that, “The human brain is a complex organ with the wonderful power of enabling man to find reasons for continuing to believe whatever it is that he wants to believe.” Before the world finalizes an agreement with the Islamic Republic, it must first face the full truth of Iran’s past and its goals for the future. A deal with Iran based on self-deception will only cause great suffering in the future. ■

Incredible Agricultural Blessings

Among the blessings delineated at the beginning of Bechukotai as reward for following the divine statutes, the Jewish people are promised that, “Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your food to satiety.” (26:5) Siftei Chamamim explains that because Scripture already promised abundance of crops in verse four (“the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit”), verse five cannot simply be a promise of more food. For this reason, Rashi quotes the Midrash (Torat Kohanim 26:6) and explains that this verse promises, “One will eat only a little [food], but it will become blessed in one’s innards.” In other words, the food itself will be more potent. Not only will we have plenty of food; we’ll need to eat less of it as well.

Israel’s incredible agricultural advancements have not only increased crop yields, but also promises to increase the potency of food as well. At the recent AgriVest conference in Tel Aviv last month, Israeli Agritech companies showcased numerous agricultural innovations that promise to improve crop yield, reduce waste, and save water. [According to Israel21c](#), the startup company DouxMatok was named Best Company at the conference, chosen by an international industry panel as this year’s outstanding startup for creating technologies to make sugar sweeter and reduce the amount of sugar required in foods. In addition, the Jerusalem Post [reported](#) that Israel’s Agricultural Ministry’s Agricultural Research Organization-Volcani Center signed a memorandum of understanding with the international World Food Preservation Center, a unique coalition of ten research universities on six continents who are working to build sustainable techniques to combat food loss, “with a goal of reducing post-harvest food losses in developing countries.” Today we are witnessing the literal fulfillment of Rashi’s comments: Israeli companies are discovering ways not only of producing and preserving more food, but also new methods to make the food we already eat more potent, effective and healthy. ■

Jerusalem – A City of Global Peace

We pray for peace in Israel each and every day: *Oseh Shalom bimromav*—“God who makes peace in the Heavens, will make peace among us and among all of Israel...” We conclude the Amidah with this prayer; every *kaddish* ends with this prayer—it’s one of our greatest hopes and dreams, so we pray and work to achieve it. Yet, the desire for peace has a global dimension as well. We not only pray for peace for Israel, but for the entire world.

We find this desire for universal peace in the blessings promised in Bechukotai. Among the blessings promised to the nation should the people follow the statutes, Moses tells us that, “...[You shall] dwell in your land safely; And I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you tremble...” (26:5-6) Commentaries wonder: what is the meaning of having “peace in the land” if the previous verse already promised that we would dwell safely? If we are safe, must there not already be peace? Ohr Hachayim (on verse 6) suggests that “the land” in verse 6 refers not to the Land of Israel, but to the entire world. “Here, when it says ‘In the land,’ it is a promise that there will be peace across the world, and you will find that this is the desire of God...It is also natural that when there is war in the world even those that live in safety tremble at hearing the cries of war. It is for this reason that the verse concludes, ‘and you shall lie down and none shall make you tremble.’” Only when all of humanity has the ability to live in peace can those who already live in peace sleep at night, without tremble or worry.

On Sunday, citizens of Israel will celebrate Yom Yerushalayim—“Jerusalem Day”—marking the 48th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem, also known as the “City of Peace.” While Jerusalem remains a subject of great controversy and conflict, it also, somewhat paradoxically, serves as a model for peace and coexistence. Since Israel regained control of the Holy City, it has kept the city open and free to the world’s three major religions, maintaining a fragile coexistence, and preserving the rights of each faith to worship side-by-side. Jerusalem today represents the greatest model and hope for international peace and coexistence. When we pray for world peace, we must hold up the city of Jerusalem as a shining example of a country working hard to ensure that the three faiths can live, work, and pray in the same city, in peace. ■