



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 11, 2016

Parashat Bo

Freedom From, or Freedom To

Let My people go that they may serve Me (Exodus 10:3)

שלח את עמי ויעבדני (שמות י:ג)

Freedom House released its [Freedom in the World Survey for 2015](#). America is considered “free,” as is Canada and almost all of Europe, which appear on their interactive map as a sea of green, symbolizing free countries. Yet, when you scroll to the Middle East, the colors change dramatically. Lebanon is categorized as “Partly Free.” Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Iran are “Not Free.” Syria and Saudi Arabia? Freedom House ranks those countries as “The Worst of the Worst.” Only one country within the entire Middle East is colored in green: Israel. While it grapples with a seemingly unending wave of terrorism, Israel proudly stands as a beacon of freedom and democracy in a dangerous neighborhood between the merely “Not Free” and the “Worst of the Worst.”

Bo is the Torah reading that chronicles our national freedom. It records the period when Moses transforms a band of slaves into a proud and free nation. Commenting on this transition, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Lecture on Leadership 6-10-1974) teaches, “The purpose of the Exodus is not political freedom, but the conversion of a slave society into a *mamlechet kohanim v’goi kadosh*—a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.”

When Israel’s founders created the Jewish state, they had this very idea in mind. They were not just seeking freedom for the Jewish people from persecution, rather, [they declared that their new State](#), “will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” They sought to create a country which would serve as a beacon of freedom for the world; a place that would at once create a homeland for the Jewish people, but at the same time uphold rights and freedoms for people of all races and religions.

While Israel is far from perfect, it engages in a constant struggle to balance its Jewish nature with the freedoms it guarantees for all citizens. It works hard to ensure freedom of religious expression for all religions, allowing each faith to [observe its holidays and customs free from harassment or persecution](#). The people of Israel strive to [create unity and harmony between Arabs and Jews](#) in small towns and big cities. Israel takes pride in being a country where Jews and Arabs [create safe spaces to express their individual life choices](#).

Our work to ensure a strong U.S.-Israel relationship reinforces the freedoms that Israel proudly upholds. We take great pride in the tiny green Israel on Freedom House’s online map, knowing that Israel will always ensure that every citizen enjoys not only “free from” tyranny and persecution, but “freedom to” uphold and promote the values of democracy and equality in the most dangerous neighborhood in the world. ■

Economic Punishment: The Proper Course of Action

Jewels of silver and jewels of gold (Exodus 11:2)

כלי כסף וכלי זהב (שמות י"ב)

While the translation of the Bible into the Greek Septuagint in the 3rd century BCE exposed the Jewish canon to the wider world, it also offered a wealth of material to adversaries looking to criticize and attack the Jewish people. Reading the story of the Exodus, many Egyptians criticized the Jews for possibly looting Egypt. Moses is explicitly instructed, "Speak now in the ears of the people, and let them ask every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold." (Exodus 11:2) The Israelites follow his instructions. "And Adonai gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And they despoiled the Egyptians." (12:36) The Talmud (Sanhedrin 91a) relates that the people of Egypt actually sued the Jewish community in the court of Alexander the Great for reparations for the money they claimed was "stolen" from them. While the Talmud relates that they lost the case, the accusation that the Jews stole the wealth of Egypt persisted for centuries.

Ancient Egyptian Jewish scholars vigorously defended their biblical ancestors' actions. For example, Philo of Alexandria (b. 25 BCE), in his work "On the Life of Moses" (pp 140-142) offers an explanation for the taking of Egypt's wealth. He notes that when asking for the Egyptians' possessions, "They took the wages that had been due to them for their work throughout all that time." Expanding on that idea, Elchanan Samet suggests that, the taking of Egypt's wealth served "to punish Egypt in some measure for the extended enslavement which [the Egyptians] had perpetrated upon them." While the Jews could never sufficiently punish Egypt for centuries of enslavement, they could make it suffer economically for its crimes. Today, leading lawmakers are calling upon the United States to take similar action and impose economic sanctions to punish Iran for overtly violating United Nations resolutions.

After the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) last summer, Iran conducted two missile launches, which violated a June 2010 United Nations (UN) resolution. Under terms of the agreement, violations of UN sanctions merit punitive actions, including economic sanctions. While the U.S. Department of Treasury notified Congress late last month that it intended to impose sanctions on nearly a dozen companies and individuals for providing support to Iran's ballistic-missile program, the administration later walked back its notification and the sanctions were not issued. "We just have additional work that we need to do as the U.S. government before we would announce additional designations," Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said about the delay.

In response, leading lawmakers from both parties, including supporters of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), criticized the administration for delaying new sanctions on Tehran over its missile program, and are pressing the administration to impose the new penalties warning that the delay will embolden Tehran's destabilizing regional activities. Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) told the Wall Street Journal that "strict, aggressive, and consistent enforcement is critical to punishing Iran for its destabilizing behavior and making the nuclear deal work... I believe in the power of vigorous enforcement that pushes back on Iran's bad behavior," said Coons. "If we don't do that, we invite Iran to cheat." Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Corker (R-TN) expressed concerns regarding the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal in light of the delayed sanctions. "If our administration cannot impose consequences for ballistic missile launches now, when sanctions and a clear U.N. ban are still in place, I have no confidence it will enforce the JCPOA or penalize future launches when sanctions are lifted."

After the sanctions were scrapped last week, Iran seemed to reinforce the notion that delaying sanctions would embolden it further when it [unveiled on state television a new underground depot for its medium- range ballistic missiles](#). The United States must immediately impose the planned sanctions to punish Iran for its dangerous and illicit behavior, and send a clear message to Iran that we will not allow them to cheat on their agreements. ■

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