



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 22, 2015

Parashat Chukat

Peace, Water, Sanctity

Hear now you rebels (Numbers 20:10)

שמעו נא המורים (במדבר כ:י)

Earlier this month, at a conference center on the eastern bank of the Dead Sea in Jordan, government officials from Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Israel, diplomats, international development agencies and river basin experts gathered to [release a master plan](#) to jointly convert the Jordan river—currently a toxic river connected to a highly depressed economic area—into an international model for river rehabilitation and regional stability. The meeting followed an [action by mayors from 114 North American cities](#) who signed a memorandum of understanding to take part in efforts to rehabilitate the Jordan River.

Moses was also tasked with revitalizing the water resources for the Jewish nation. Following the death of Miriam, the nation's well dried up, leaving the people angry without a source of water. God instructed Moses to take his staff and go speak to the well, after which it would produce water in abundance. Moses gathered the people and told them, "Hear now, you rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?" (20:10) Then, rather than speaking to the rock, Moses struck it instead, and miraculously drew water for the people. For this mistake, Moses received a shocking punishment. Rather than enter the Promised Land as he had long dreamed to do, he too would perish in the desert. "Because you believed not in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." (20:12)

What was so terrible about Moses' sin that he received such a severe punishment? Commentators throughout the ages have hotly debated this point. Maimonides (see his 'Eight Chapters – Introduction to Avot', chapter 4) suggests that Moses sinned by succumbing to anger. He writes, "When [Moses] veered toward the side of agitation when he said, 'Hear now you rebels,' the Holy One was meticulous with him: should a person like him become angry before the community of Israel in a situation where anger is inappropriate? Behavior such as this in this man represents a desecration of the Name [of God], because all learn from his actions and words..." By speaking out in anger, Moses desecrated the name of God (*chillul hashem*), while instead he could and should have caused the sanctification of the Name (*kiddush hashem*) by speaking in a measured, peaceful manner.

Perhaps even more significant than the water conference in Jordan itself, were the guests who had joined as observers. According to the Israeli Newspaper *Mekor Rishon*, delegates from Pakistan and India also attended the conference in the hopes of learning strategies from the Israelis, which would help them resolve their own dispute over water resources. With its booming population and dwindling water resources, Pakistan finds itself increasingly dependent on its neighboring adversary India for water. Malani Miara, a member of the Indian delegation, said that while the Pakistan-India conflict differs from the Middle East dispute in many ways, "Just as the Israelis and Jordanians know how to partner in real-world issues like water, India and Pakistan must similarly learn to solve problems through partnerships... We're talking about managing a three-nation dispute involving farmers, government officials, and the volunteer organization EcoPeace. When we see here the unbelievable things you are doing, we have a great deal to learn. We will take things from the partnership here to our region."

Ultimately, by learning to speak peacefully with its neighbors, Israel has not only solved great water challenges for itself, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. In addition, Israel and her partners have also created a *kiddush hashem*, serving as a model for partnership and peace that will hopefully spread to other troubled regions around the world. ■

Continuing to Press

Let me pass through your land (Numbers 21:22)

אעברה בארצך (במדבר כא:כב)

In the months leading up to the preliminary agreement with Iran over its nuclear program, President Obama has stated firmly that he would insist on a good deal, and if a good deal cannot be reached then he would walk away. He [told CBS News](#), “If we cannot verify that they are not going to obtain a nuclear weapon, that there’s a breakout period so that even if they cheated we would be able to have enough time to take action. If we don’t have that kind of deal, then we’re not going to take it.” The President reassured us that no deal was better than a bad deal.

Yet, recent media reports seem to signal that rather than insisting on a good deal or walk away, the U.S. has been making troubling concessions in the ongoing secret nuclear talks with Iran. [The Los Angeles Times](#) reports that “U.S. diplomats aren’t demanding immediate access” to suspect nuclear sites, and that inspections could be delayed by 30 days while a commission determines if inspectors will be granted access. According to [The Associated Press](#), “The Obama Administration may have to backtrack on its promise that it will suspend only nuclear-related economic sanctions.” Moreover, [The Associated Press](#) also reports that, “World powers are prepared to accept a nuclear agreement with Iran that doesn’t immediately answer questions about past atomic weapons work.” If true, these reports paint a troubling picture and raise serious questions about the possibility of reaching a good deal with Iran.

Moses, facing a similar challenge, hoped and tried to reach a peaceful agreement with an adversary. After the forty years of wandering in the desert finally drew to a close, the Children of Israel progressed towards the Holy Land by following a northbound path up the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Only the nations of Edom and Amor stood in their way. When Moses confronted the Amorites who blocked the Jews’ path, Moses sent a message of peace to Sichon, king of the Amorites: “Let me pass through your land...” (21:22) In fact, Moses offered very generous terms to the Amorites: “We will not turn aside into field, or into vineyard; we will not drink of the water of the wells; we will go by the king’s highway, until we have passed thy border.” Rashi notes that Moses reached out in an attempt to negotiate, “even though [Moses] was not commanded to sue for peace.” Ramban (on verses 21-22) explains that had Sichon accepted Moses’ proposal, the Amorites would have been subjugated to the Jewish people. Rather than accept Moses’ terms, the Amorites gathered armies to attack the Jewish nation, which led to their ultimate defeat. Still, when the Amorites refused Moses’ demands, instead of backing down, Moses continued to press the Amorites to submit.

President Obama must do the same. In a [letter to the President](#) last week, Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned that the United States has made “breathtaking” concessions that risk creating a “bad deal,” insisting that instead President Obama must be willing to walk away from the negotiating table. “Please pause and consider rethinking the entire approach,” Corker wrote. “Walking away from a bad deal at this point would take courage, but it would be the best thing for the United States, the region and the world.” In response, President Obama indicated a willingness to do just that. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), “National Security Council spokesman Ned Price said the Obama administration agrees with Corker ‘that no deal is preferable to a bad deal...The president has been clear that if the understanding and the position of Iranian officials in a final deal can’t be squared with our bottom lines, including vigorous inspections to assure that Iran isn’t cheating, and the need for a capacity to snap back sanctions in the event of a violation, then we’re not going to get a deal, period.’”

As the Iranians demonstrate reluctance to negotiate in good faith, the United States must stand behind its firm commitment to insist that Iran take the concrete steps necessary to preclude a path to a nuclear weapon. Anything less would represent a bad deal that the president should not accept. ■

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