



Sermon Tidbits

JULY 20, 2015

Parashat Devarim

Learning the Lessons of History

These are the words... (Deuteronomy 1:1)

אלה הדברים (דברים א:א)

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This famous quotation from philosopher and poet George Santayana (*The Life of Reason*, 1905) serves as both an admonition and an instruction for us to study history—both recent and distant—to learn from our past mistakes.

Moses worried about the same problem. The first half of Deuteronomy represents, in essence, a single address from Moses to the Nation of Israel as he prepares them to enter the Promised Land. Time and time again, Moses stresses this simple message: “Be strong. Do not fear. And do not make the sinful mistakes of the past that brought trouble and suffering to the people.” Even at the outset of his address, Moses subtly communicates this critical message through the description of their locations: “In the wilderness, in the Arabah, over against Suph, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth, and Di-zahab.” (1:1) Where are these places, and why are they mentioned in the preamble to his address? Rashi (on verse 1) explains, “As these were words of rebuke, Moses listed here all the places that [the people] angered the Holy One...” Moses referred to these locales not because he wanted to make geographical references, but instead because each location represented a different national failure. For example, “the wilderness” recalled the time the people questioned God’s ability to lead them into the Holy Land (Exodus 16:3); in “the Arabah” the nation worshipped idolatry. Each location represents a subtle but unmistakable message to the nation: remember your failures, and make every effort to avoid those mistakes in the future.

For those concerned about the pending international agreement with Iran, the United States seems to be making this very mistake of forgetting the past and repeating avoidable mistakes. History has shown that Iran has, time and time again, violated its own agreements with the international community. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), even in November of 2013 after Iran signed the interim agreement with the international community, it brazenly violated that agreement by attempting to purchase prohibited nuclear and weapons technology. “Germany’s domestic intelligence agency, the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) confirmed in a report that Iran continues to seek illicit technology for its nuclear and missiles program... Iran’s illegal proliferation activities have continued since the Joint Plan of Action agreement was agreed upon in 2013 through the present day.”

Moreover, Iran’s history of cheating has instilled a deep sense of distrust both in the American people, as well as among elected leaders on both sides of the aisle. More than half of Americans told a [Monmouth University poll](#) that they did “not at all” trust Iran to abide by terms of the agreement. Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa [said](#) that, “This [Iran] is a country that sponsors terrorism and has a history of hiding its nuclear program from outside inspectors.” While Democratic Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware has reserved judgment on the final deal, he told [Politico](#), “Iran has seriously earned our distrust.”

In 1994, the United States, Japan and South Korea, China and Russia entered into an agreement with North Korea to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. In a White House Press conference, President Bill Clinton [announced](#), “This is a good deal for the United States. North Korea will freeze and then dismantle its nuclear program. South Korea and our other allies will be better protected. The entire world will be safer as we slow the spread of nuclear

weapons...The United States and international inspectors will carefully monitor North Korea to make sure it keeps its commitments.” By 2002, it was clear that North Korea had covertly restarted its nuclear program. In 2006, North Korea conducted a nuclear test. North Korea also continued to develop ballistic missiles, all the while starving its citizens.

Today, we run the risk of repeating the mistakes of history. Like North Korea, Iran has a long history of cheating and violating international agreements. Only a [good deal](#), lasting for decades, with robust “anytime, anywhere” inspections, phased sanctions relief based on Iranian actions, dismantlement of Iran’s existing nuclear infrastructure and the Islamic Republic coming clean about the past military dimensions of its nuclear work will ensure that in a decade, or less, Tehran does not join Pyongyang in the nuclear weapons club. ■

Tisha B'av – A Day of Hope

All who mourn for Jerusalem (Ta'anit 30)

כל המתאבל על ירושלים (תענית ל')

Earlier this year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with a group of children, some of whom had lost relatives in the 2014 Gaza War. Hayout Bayhsian, a young girl of Ethiopian descent who had lost her father Sgt. Kshaun Bayhesian asked the Prime Minister, “How did it feel when your brother Yonatan (who was killed in the Entebbe raid in 1972) passed away?” Netanyahu leaned in towards the young girl and [told her](#): “For me it was very, very difficult. We were very close. I felt like someone took an axe and chopped my hand off. Not only the hand, someone took an axe and chopped off my leg. Maybe both legs. That’s how I felt. So if you’re with no hand and with no leg ... you possibly think ‘How can I live, right?’ That’s how I felt. But what did I figure out? I figured out that life is like a river that flows on and gets to new places. New turns and curves in the river. Then you find the way to overcome that feeling and to continue living, even though you always remember [the person you lost]. So continue living.”

On one day during the year, the entire nation of Israel engages in mourning—fasting and sitting on the ground as if we are sitting Shiva for the destruction of the Temple. Yet, while we mourn and yearn for the redemption of the Jewish people and the world, our mourning represents a symbol of hope. This is because when we mourn for Jerusalem, we express our passion, devotion and connection to the Land of Israel through our actions. In Eliyahu Kitov’s “Book of Our Heritage” (vol. 3 p. 242) he writes, “It is told of the Emperor Napoleon of France, that he once passed the entrance of a synagogue in Paris on Tisha B’av. At seeing the Jews seated on the ground, weeping and lamenting over the destruction of the Sanctuary and the land, as if the calamity had befallen them only yesterday, he stood in amazement and said, ‘I vow that this people is destined for a successful future in its own land; for where can we find a single other people which kept alive similar mourning and hope for thousands of years?’” Napoleon’s prediction mirrored a statement found in the Talmud (Bavli Taanit 30b): “All who mourn [for the destruction of] Jerusalem will merit and witness the city in her joy.” The very act of mourning on Tisha B’av speaks to the devotion of the Jewish people to return to the Land of Israel.

Today, in an era when the Jewish people have finally returned to build a flourishing Jewish state, we can look back and recognize how our national mourning over the ages kindled the flame of national hope throughout the long centuries of exile. That yearning spurred the early leaders of Zionism to reinvigorate and rebuild the Jewish Land. Today, we witness the fruits of their labor, in the thriving state of Israel boasting a strong, stable economy; a flowering nation whose technological innovations are changing lives around the globe; and a bastion of freedom, equality and democracy in the most dangerous region in the world.

Yet, as long as Israel’s adversaries threaten her safety and security, she cannot fully rejoice. This year, as we express our sense of mourning for Jerusalem on Tisha B’av, we must channel our passion, devotion and dedication towards ensuring that the state of Israel continues to grow and thrive as a land of brotherhood and peace for all of its inhabitants. ■