



Sermon Tidbits

MARCH 2, 2015

Parashat Ki Tisa

Paying the Price

This they shall give (Exodus 30:13)

זה יתנו (שמות ל:יג)

Attorney Mark I. Sokolow escaped from the south tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. The following January, he and his family traveled to Israel to visit their eldest daughter. While standing with his wife Rena and their two other daughters outside a shoe store on Jaffa Road, a suicide bomber blew herself up, killing one Israeli and wounding more than 100 other people, including the Sokolows. Unlike Israelis, who have little legal recourse against terror organizations, the Anti-Terrorism Act allows victims of U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations to seek compensation for pain and suffering, loss of earnings and other hardships. Backed by U.S. law, the Sokolows together with dozens of other plaintiffs sued the Palestinian Authority in Federal District Court in New York. According to the [New York Times](#), last week a jury awarded the plaintiffs \$218.5 million in damages, and thanks to a special anti-terrorism law that provides for the tripling the damages, brought the total amount owed by the Palestinian Authority to \$655.5 million. “Money is oxygen for terrorism,” said Kent A. Yalowitz, a lawyer for the families in a closing argument on Thursday. “[The anti-terrorism law] hits those who send terrorists where it hurts them most: in the wallet.”

Parashat Ki Tisa opens with the commandment that each member of the Jewish nation must contribute a half-shekel for the upkeep in the Tabernacle. Noting the unusual language which states that, “*This* they shall give,” Rashi (on verse 13) quoting Midrash teaches that Moses was shown an image of a coin so that he would know exactly what amount to collect from the people. “[The Holy One] showed [Moses] a coin of fire whose weight was a half-shekel and said, ‘Like this they shall give.’” Why did God show Moses a coin of fire? Why not show him a regular coin?

Rabbi Nachman of Breslev explains that money and fire share unique qualities. Fire is considered to be one of the most important and indispensable elements known to man. Fire, when used properly, helps the world to exist. But when misused, that very same fire also has the potential to be destructive and could destroy the world. The same can be said of money. Money, when used properly, helps to make the world a better place. But wealth also carries great danger if it falls into the wrong hands and if misused, money could lead to terrible destruction. Moses was shown a coin of fire to emphasize that both fire and money carry incredible powers for good and for evil. When used properly, fire and money can bring great well-being to the world. But in the wrong hands, fire and money can cause pain, death and destruction.

For years, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has utilized its wealth to spread the values of hatred, terrorism and murder. The PA even pays monthly [stipends to terrorists and convicted murderers](#), thereby encouraging others to follow suit. According to the [Huffington Post](#), plaintiffs in the trial above “relied on internal records showing the Palestinian Authority continued to pay the salaries of employees who were put behind bars in terror cases and paid benefits to families of suicide bombers and gunmen who died committing the attacks.” Yalowitz put up a photo of Yasser Arafat on a video screen, telling the jury that the late Palestinian leader had approved martyrdom payments and incited violence with anti-Israeli propaganda. “Where are the documents punishing employees for killing people?” Yalowitz asked. “We don’t have anything like that in this case.”

If the PA wants to avoid substantial payments to victims of terror, it must use its funds not to promote hatred and terrorism, but rather to build a productive and peaceful society. The PA must now realize that as long as it uses its money to fund terrorism—breeding dangerous and deadly fires—U.S. law will hold them responsible and make them pay for their crimes. ■

Caring and Responsibility

He cast the tablets out of his hands (Exodus 32:19)

וישלך מיידו את הלחת (שמות לב:יט)

“*Kol Yisrael Areivim zeh bazeh*—All of Israel is responsible for each other.” This maxim found in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 27b), articulates an ethic of mutual responsibility. In classic rabbinic literature, this meant that we were responsible for the morality and religiosity of our fellow man. One couldn’t just pretend that his friend’s actions were not his concern. Rather, everyone is held accountable for our collective spiritual well-being. Today, this not only refers to our neighbor’s spirituality, but also to his overall well-being. We cannot ignore the plight of others. We must never look the other way. Our tradition holds us—both you and me—accountable.

The question is often asked, “Why did Moses break the holy Tablets that were given to him atop Mount Sinai?” At face value, we know why: “And it came to pass, as soon as he came close to the camp, that he saw the [Golden] Calf and the dancing; and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount” (Exodus 32:19). In a fit of anger and with an instantaneous reaction, Moses must have thought, “*How could they construct an idol so soon after Revelation?*” Yet, when we look deeper, this simple reading of the text raises a often overlooked question: How many people were involved directly with the sin of the Golden Calf? The suggested number is quite surprising.

Those who were involved in worshipping the Golden Calf (about 3,000—see 32:28) account for less than one half of one percent of the entire population. Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli (see *Siach Shaul* p. 288) explains that Moses was enraged not by the sinners, but by the vast majority who looked on passively and made no effort to prevent the sin from happening. “The righteous had no connection at all with the mixed multitudes...they saw no need to maintain a connection with them...” When Moses descended from Sinai he was undoubtedly angered by the Golden Calf. But what intensified that anger was the blatant indifference by the majority of people. Perhaps the catalyst for Moses breaking the Tablets was the fact that no one took action to stop the sin from taking place. From this, we can learn the powerful rule: One cannot stand on the sidelines indifferent to the sins of others. After all, we are *areivim zeh bazeh*. We are responsible for each-other.

This sense of mutual responsibility helped motivated two members of Congress to take action to protect Israel from the effects of a growing movement to isolate the Jewish state. Congressman Peter J. Roskam (R-Illinois) and Congressman Juan Vargas (D-California) have introduced the U.S.-Israel Trade and Commercial Enhancement Act. According to the [Times of Israel](#), this bipartisan legislation is aimed at curbing the spread of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement against Israel in Europe, and will “leverage ongoing trade negotiations to discourage prospective U.S. trade partners from engaging in economic discrimination against Israel.” The bill would use free trade negotiations to discourage foreign and international institutions from supporting initiatives to boycott, divest from, or sanction Israel.”

Explaining the rationale for the proposed legislation, Roskam said that, “Today, an alarming number of countries within the European Union and beyond have embraced BDS as a form of economic warfare aimed to cripple Israel’s economy and demonize its very existence. The U.S.-Israel Trade and Commercial Enhancement Act will ensure that American free trade partners never engage in this harmful and illegitimate political protest against Israel, while also protecting U.S. companies from foreign lawsuits targeting their associations with Israel.” Roskam added that while he and Congressman Vargas represent different political parties, “we share a common belief that a strong and prosperous Israel is a necessity for the United States. Congress has always been the bedrock of the U.S.-Israel relationship, and we have an historic opportunity before us to once again reaffirm the mutually beneficial ties that bind our great nations.”

The Congressmen saw a friend in need and stepped forward, ready to act to protect Israel’s interests in the international arena, demonstrating that Americans take the idea of mutual responsibility with Israel very seriously. ■

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