



Sermon Tidbits

OCTOBER 19, 2015

Parashat Lech Lecha

An Immediate Response

He led forth his trained men (Genesis 14:14)

וירק את חניכיו (בראשית יד:יד)

On July 22, 2014—over four hundred and fifty days ago—Iranian police officers stormed the Tehran apartment of American-born Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian and his wife Yeganeh Salehi, taking both into Iranian custody. Salehi was later released on bail, yet Rezaian was charged with espionage against the Islamic Republic and detained for trial. Since that time, he has languished in an Iranian prison where he has been subjected to numerous violations of both international and Iranian law, including being placed in solitary confinement for over ninety consecutive days. Last week, Iranian officials announced that he was convicted of espionage over two months ago, a fact Rezaian learned [watching Iranian state television](#). Political pundits suggest that Iran has imprisoned Rezaian and two other Americans in the hopes of exacting the release of Iranians held by the United States for economic sanctions violations. If so, this would not be the first time an evil regime kidnapped innocent people in order to extract concessions. The same thing happened in Parshat Lech Lecha to Abram.

Parshat Lech Lecha relates the broad details of a war between the “Four Kings” and the “Five Kings”—essentially a fight between regional warlords over money and power. When the dust finally settled, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah (from the “Four Kings”) lost the war and fled in defeat, leaving their subjects and property to plunder. After the Five Kings took all the property of Sodom and Gomorrah, we read that, “And they took Lot, Abram’s brother’s son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.”(14:12) Why does the verse specifically note the fact that Lot was Abram’s nephew—information the reader already knows from previous verses? S’forno (on verse 12) explains that, “They made an effort to capture Lot *because* he was the nephew of Abram—whose wealth was known—and they expected that Abram would redeem [Lot] for a great sum.” Abram understood this intuitively, which is precisely why he took immediate action to ensure that this would never happen again. “And when Abram heard that his brother [’s son] was taken captive, he led forth his trained men...” (verse 14) Rashi explains that the word *vayarek* means that he hurried his trained men to action in response. Every moment of delay caused Lot greater suffering. Moreover, Ramban notes that the chase after the invading armies, “took many days until he drove them from the land.” Abram recognized that immediate and prolonged effort represented the only hope of freeing Lot without submitting to blackmail and extortion.

The illegal and immoral imprisonment for practicing journalism, which is a tool of freedom and democracy, of Jason Rezaian should shake each of us deeply. The United States must follow Abram’s example and utilize the numerous tools at its disposal to press Iran to end this heinous human rights abuse. Iran’s actions against Rezaian also help to highlight Iran’s dismal human rights record and its total rejection of international norms. According to the [Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index](#), Iran currently ranks 173 out of 180 countries in press freedom, and holds at least 50 journalists and netizens in Iranian prisons. U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Rabbi David Saperstein, said in [The State Department’s U.S. International Religious Freedom Report](#) that “in October Iran reported that as of June at least 300 minority religious practitioners were imprisoned, including three active members of the Yarsani faith.” [Amnesty International reported](#) that Iran executed 694 people in the first six-and-a-half months of 2015, stating that Iran’s execution rate “paints a sinister picture of the machinery of the state carrying out premeditated, judicially-sanctioned killings on a mass scale.”

Jason Rezaian's conviction marks the latest example of Iran's complete disregard for judicial due process and international legal norms. As the United States must continue to press Iran to end its ongoing human rights abuses, the International Community must also reevaluate Iran's willingness and readiness to maintain its commitments in the recently signed nuclear accord. Iran's willingness to flout international law and brazenly convict an American journalist should spark serious concern over Iran's trustworthiness in the future. ■

Seeking the Stars

Look now toward heaven (Genesis 15:5)

הִבֵּט נָא הַשְּׁמַיִמָה (בְּרֵאשִׁית טו:ה)

Last week, legendary astronaut and moonwalker Dr. Buzz Aldrin spoke in Jerusalem as part of the 66th International Aeronautical Congress. Israel's Space Agency (ISA) hosted the largest annual event designed for the study and development of the space industry, bringing over 2,000 international visitors hailing from 58 different countries to Jerusalem for the five-day program. According to the [Times of Israel](#), "The choice of Jerusalem as the host city for the annual International Astronautical Congress is considered a sign of Israel's growing influence in the field of space exploration and technology." The conference also served as the backdrop for the signing of a new space cooperation agreement between the Israeli and American space agencies, after the last agreement, which resulted in the sending of an Israeli astronaut, Col. Ilan Roman, on the final, ill-fated flight of Space Shuttle Columbia, lapsed in 2005. Yet, most people may not realize that Ramon was not the first astronaut from the Land of Israel. According to the Midrash, that distinction belongs to our forefather Abram, who lived many centuries ago.

After the dangerous, frightening but ultimately successful mission to free Lot from captivity, Abram is filled with a sense of fear and dread that he would never have a child to serve as his spiritual heir. God appears to Abram to reassure him that he will indeed be blessed with a child. When Abram expresses doubt we read that God, "brought him outside, and said: 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them;' and God said to him: 'So shall your descendants be.'" (15:5) Rashi, quoting the Midrash commenting on the phrase "And God brought him outside" suggests that this was no mere outdoor excursion. "God took him out of the atmosphere of the world and lifted [Abram] above the stars. This is the meaning of the word 'look'—which means [to look] below from above." (Rashi on verse 5) The Midrash clearly intends to convey the idea that God expressed to Abram the ability to overcome seemingly impossible circumstances that would bring him and Sarai a child. If God could take Abram into space, God could surely bless Sarai with a baby. Yet, the imagery of Abram, hovering in the clouds above, serves as a powerful model for all Israelis who dream of conquering the heavens in space flight.

Israel has racked up a number of impressive recent achievements in the area of spaceflight. This month, SpaceIL, an Israeli non-profit group, became the [first official contestant to register](#) for the \$20 million [Google Lunar X Prize](#) competition, which challenges non-profit private entities to soft-land a vehicle on the moon. You can see the words *Am Yisrael Chai* in Hebrew on the mockup of the Israeli lunar lander. In addition, [Facebook recently announced](#) that it is planning to launch an AMOS-6 satellite built by Israel Aerospace Industries to bring internet access to developing markets in Africa.

After the signing of the agreement of cooperation with ISA director Menachem Kidron, NASA administrator Charles Bolden, speaking about Israel said that "You are noted for your innovation and your expertise in technology development. What we are about when we talk about going to Mars is exactly that. Technology drives exploration. We can't do the things we want to do; we can't go the places we want to go without developing new technologies and innovative ways of doing things. I think it is critically important that we are able to join hands with our partners in Israel in this joint endeavor." For its part, the Israel Space Agency expressed hope that the Jewish state's technology would play a key role in future missions to Mars. Abram would wholeheartedly agree. ■

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