



Sermon Tidbits

JULY 13, 2015

Parashat Matot-Masei

Keeping Our Word

According to all that proceeds out of his mouth (Numbers 30:3)

ככל היוצא מפיו (במדבר ל:ג)

It can be very challenging to deal with people who don't keep their commitments—the coworker who promises to finish the project, but never does or the neighbor who says that she'll meet you at a certain time and place, but never shows up—for we depend on those around us and the commitments that they make. After enough bad experiences with someone whose word means little, we move on—to another employee, or to a different neighbor or sometimes to a different friend. Author Margaret Paul [offers](#) five reasons for us to keep our word: integrity, trust, reliability, respect and self-worth. If we want to be people of integrity; if we want others to trust, rely on and respect us, and if we want to truly value ourselves—then we must keep our word, say what we mean and do what we say.

Parashat Matot begins with this very admonition, which is directed specifically to the heads of the tribes. “When a man vows a vow to Adonai or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” (30:3) Rabbi Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz, in his classic work *Shnei Luchot Habrit*, (Ohr Torah on Parshat Ki Teitzei) notes that the power of speech elevates man above other living things in intellect and sanctity. (See Targum Onkelos on Genesis 2:7) For this reason, he writes that the admonition to keep our word applies not only to oaths, but to all other speech as well. Maimonides (Book of Commandments, Negative Commandment 157) notes that the admonition not to break one's word represents a negative commandment prohibiting us from “violating that to which we committed ourselves, even without an oath...and the [Midrash] explains the words ‘he shall not break (*yachel*) his word’ to mean that ‘he shall not profane his words (*ya’ase devarav chullin*),’ meaning if he committed himself to something, he should fulfill [that commitment].”

Nowhere is the commandment to keep our word more important than in the realm of international diplomacy. Other nations—both allies and adversaries—must trust that the United States will keep its word and adhere to its commitments, especially in areas critical to international security. Yet, several key elements of the emerging agreement with Iran indicate that the United States has backtracked from important commitments about crucial elements of a good deal with Iran.

In their [open letter](#) to the President, a bipartisan group of former advisors to President Obama note a number of troubling details emerging from the talks with Iran in Vienna. Among them, they note that, “[Obama remarked in April](#) that U.S. sanctions on Iran over its support for terrorism, human rights abuses and its ballistic missile program will continue to be fully enforced under a final deal.” Yet now, according to [The Associated Press](#), “the White House is attempting to redefine all sanctions as nuclear-related so they can be lifted after a final deal is struck.” In addition, in an early April [interview with Judy Woodruff](#) of PBS, Secretary of State John Kerry insisted that as part of the final agreement with Iran, “Iran must disclose past nuclear military activities for a final deal.” He spoke unequivocally, stating that, “They have to do it. It will be done. If there's going to be a deal; it will be done.” Yet, now Kerry seems to have backtracked on that commitment, suggesting that “Washington would not insist that Iran answer unresolved questions about its past nuclear activities,” Reuters [reported](#). “We're not fixated on Iran specifically accounting for what they did at one point in time or another...What we're concerned about is going forward,” Kerry said.

The Torah focuses the directive to keep our word specifically to the heads of the tribes—to our communal and government leaders—because these leaders often find themselves under intense pressure to back away from previous commitments. President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army or in an office.” What’s true for individuals applies equally to nations. For the United States to remain a nation of leadership and integrity around the world, we must say what we mean and keep to our word. The United States made very specific conditions to reach an agreement with Iran. We must now keep our word, and make the deal only if, and when, those conditions are met. ■

An Eternal Homeland

And you shall inherit the land (Numbers 33:54)

והתנחלתם אל הארץ (במדבר לג:נד)

There’s nothing scarier than home improvements. When the contractor digs up the basement or knocks down the wall, the poor homeowner is holding her breath, hoping that she won’t encounter any major surprises that will cost her time, energy or money. While we might think we have it bad here in America, our home improvement challenges pale in comparison to those of a Jerusalem couple who decided to redo their living room floor. During renovations to their home, a family living in the Ein Kerem neighborhood of Jerusalem [discovered that](#) a 2,000-year-old mikveh was right underneath their floor! Rather than covering up the discovery, the couple installed wooden doors in their floor to allow access to the site and invited representatives of the Israel Antiquities Authority to document the discovery. Authorities suggest that the find represents important evidence of the presence of a Jewish community in the Ein Karem neighborhood during the Second Temple Era.

This amazing find represents yet another piece of historical evidence connecting the people of Israel to their eternal homeland. The theological connection between the Jewish people and the Promised Land began during Abraham’s time when God promised him, “To your descendants will I give this land...” (Genesis 12:7) Throughout the book of Bamidbar, the text uses language that concretizes the bond between the nation of Israel and the Promised Land. Last week, in Parashat Pinchas, when Moses divided the Land through a lottery, the text describes the division of the Land as an “inheritance” (*nachalah*). Again this week, Moses repeats this description, telling the nation, “And you shall inherit the land by lot according to your families... according to the tribes of your fathers shall you inherit.” (33:54)

For years, the Palestinian Authority, despite its professed desire to reach a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel, has engaged in an extensive campaign to deny any connection between the Land of Israel and the Jewish people. In an op-ed in March, Fatah Revolutionary Council member Bakr Abu Bakr [wrote](#), “The second principle [Netanyahu] relies on is the theft and crude falsification of history, based on the assumption that Palestine is the land of his ‘ancestors’—even though [Netanyahu] and those he represents are strangers to this land both now and historically speaking or [the land of] those he claims are his kings and prophets... The third principle, related to those described above, is that Netanyahu’s reliance on the falsification and theft of history is connected to the strong link created between the false-historic (in the Bible and its adjuncts) and the spiritual-religious...” Additionally, just last week, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported that the PLO Ambassador to Chile, Imad Nabil Jada’a, told an audience in Santiago that Palestinians, “don’t recognize the existence of the Jewish people” and then went on to recommend that the audience read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The language of the Torah, combined with the amazing archaeological finds across the Holy Land, only reinforces our connection to the land, and serves to strengthen our commitment to protect, defend and support the state of Israel, the eternal homeland of the Jewish people. ■

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