

MAY 25, 2015

Parashat Naso

The Basic Building Blocks of Peace

May the Lord bless you and keep you (Numbers 6:24)

יברכך ה' וישמרך (במדבר ו: כד)

Last month, on Yom Hashoah, Shalom Yohai Sherki was run down and killed in a [terrorist car ramming attack](#) as he waited for a bus in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem. Two weeks ago, Muhammad Arfaaya [admitted to ramming his car](#) into pedestrians at the busy Alon Shvut junction for nationalist (i.e. terrorist) reasons. The attack injured four, including two teens ages sixteen and seventeen. Last week, [Ynet reported](#) that, “Two Border Police officers—a man and a woman—were wounded Wednesday morning in a vehicular terror attack in Jerusalem, on the ascent to the Mount of Olives.” These “minor” attacks often don’t make for major headlines, especially when no one is killed. Yet, these random acts of terror serve as a constant backdrop to daily life in the Jewish state.

While the words of the Priestly Blessing are inspiring and uplifting—“May the Lord bless you and keep you” (6:24)—they are also vague. What exactly is the nature of these blessings? Rashi (on verse 24) interprets these blessings in material terms: “That you shall be blessed in your possessions...[and you shall be guarded] that thieves should not come upon you to take your money...” After all, what good is the blessing of wealth if you cannot enjoy that wealth without fear of being set upon by thieves? S’forno adds another element, explaining that the blessings of material prosperity and security serve not as ends, but as means to a larger goal. In his commentary (on verse 24) he simply quotes the Mishnah in Avot (3:17): *Im ein kemach, ein Torah*—“If there is no flour, then there is no Torah.” In other words, we must first fulfill our most basic physical needs before we can turn to our loftier, more spiritual goals.

This principle carries a deeper meaning beyond our own spiritual growth. If we wish to achieve the lofty goal of peace in Israel, we must first address the basic need of safety and security. It is for this reason that the blessings of financial and personal security, which serve as the opening for the Priestly Blessing, preface the conclusion that: “May the God lift up God’s countenance upon you, and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:26) Many Israelis struggle to see the possibility of peace with the Palestinians when they first have to worry whether the car coming through the nearest intersection is a threat. It’s challenging to envision a climate of peace when Palestinian culture, media and even government officials encourage and support vehicular attacks against civilians. Only when the people of Israel achieve the most basic human needs of safety and security, can they turn their attention to the loftier goal of peace with their neighbors.

In his recent meeting with the top diplomat of the European Union, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated his commitment to the two-state solution with the Palestinians. The Times of Israel [reported](#), “Netanyahu said he would like to end the conflict with the Palestinians once and for all. He added, however, that the Palestinians must recognize Israel as a Jewish state. ‘I don’t support a one state solution—I don’t believe that’s a solution at all. I support the vision of two states for two peoples—a demilitarized Palestinian state that recognizes the Jewish state...’” Israel has long committed itself, and taken meaningful steps to promote peace with the Palestinians. Yet, in return the Palestinians left the negotiating table, turned to the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, and still incite their citizens to commit acts of violence against Israeli civilians.

Israelis very much want peace, and yearn to live together in the Middle East with the Palestinian people. Yet, just as the blessing of peace can only come after the blessings of prosperity and security, peace with the Palestinians will be possible when Israelis can wait for a bus without fear of being run down by a terrorist behind the wheel of his car. ■

Emphasizing the Gift of Unity

And they brought their offering (Numbers 7:3)

ויביאו את קרבנם (במדבר ז:ג)

As Torah portions go, today's reading carries a dubious honor. Parashat Naso is the longest single Torah reading of the year, clocking in at a whopping 176 verses. Why is this week's portion so much longer than most others? The final chapter of Naso is eighty-nine verses in length (rather than the usual twenty or thirty verses). More striking than the length of the chapter is the content—detailing the accounting of the offerings offered by each of the twelve princes of Israel for the consecration of the Tabernacle. The text is striking because each of the twelve offerings was identical. Each prince gave the exact same gift: a silver dish, fine flower, a gold pan, a bull, a ram, a lamb...the list goes on. Yet, rather than list the first offering and then tells us that the next eleven princes made the same identical gift, we read, in minute detail, the offering for each and every prince.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch asks the obvious question: "Why is so much space devoted to a body of material endlessly repetitive?" He explains: "The answer, I believe, lies precisely in the sameness of the gifts. The dedicatory celebration is not an occasion to rank tribal leaders by the birth of their eponym or the size of their tribe...The list does not betray that some tribes are privileged or more important. The uniformity in giving conveys rather an extraordinary sense of national unity. Through the person of their leader, each tribe in the Israelite confederation gives voice to the same level of commitment to the national mission and mores accepted at Mount Sinai." With each additional repetition of the gift, the text conveys the increasing strength of national unity. The chiefs of each tribe consciously worked together to express their common goals, and chose to articulate this unity through their dedication of the Tabernacle.

Our elected leaders are not known for their sense of unity. Yet, our representatives in both houses of Congress recently came together in a bipartisan fashion to pass legislation critical to the security of the United States and Israel. According to [CNN](#), "The House of Representatives approved legislation [last] Thursday that allows Congress to review any deal on Iran's nuclear program negotiated by the Obama Administration. The measure passed with an overwhelming bipartisan vote 400-25." The companion bill also passed the Senate 98-1. In truth, the legislation sailed through Congress only because members of the Senate from both sides of the aisle strongly supported the bill. While the White House initially resisted efforts to give Congress a role in the [pending agreement with Iran](#), "once it became apparent that both Republicans and Democrats had a veto-proof majority, the White House said it would support a compromise crafted by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, R-Tennessee and the top Democrat on the panel, Sen Ben Cardin, D-Maryland."

Of course, we should thank our elected representatives for their strong support of this important legislation. But we also should not overlook the fact that this bill gave the country what [The Financial Times](#) called, "a rare moment of bipartisan unity." In such politically divisive times, the fact that Americans from across the political spectrum strongly supported legislation critical to Israel's future speaks volumes about the strong, bipartisan support for Israel that runs through both political parties. This unity isn't something we should take for granted, for as we learn from Parashat Naso, when we see a strong show of unity, that's something worth repeating. ■

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