



Sermon Tidbits

OCTOBER 12, 2015

Parashat Noah

A Mountain Treasured by Jewish Tradition

And Noah built an altar (Genesis 8:20)

ויבן נח מזבח (בראשית ח:כ)

When Matvei Tcepliaev, a ten-year-old tourist visiting Israel from Russia, participated in the Temple Mount Sifting Project, never did he imagine that he would discover an ancient artifact from the time of King David in the 10th century BCE. Dr. Gabriel Barkay is the co-founder and director of the project—which sifts through thousands of tons of earth which was illegally removed from the contested holy site in 1999 by the Waqf religious trust to build a mosque. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), Barkay said that the finding is unprecedented, stating that, “the seal is the first of its kind to be found in Jerusalem... The dating of the seal corresponds to the historical period of the Jebusites and the conquest of Jerusalem by King David, as well as the construction of the Temple and the royal official compound by his son, King Solomon. What makes this discovery particularly significant is that it originated from upon the Temple Mount itself.”

After Noah disembarked from the ark following the great flood that destroyed mankind, he brought an offering of thanks to God for his salvation. “And Noah built an altar to the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar...” (8:20) While we read that the ark landed on Mount Arrarat, Jewish tradition has long connected Noah’s altar with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Describing the location of the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem, Maimonides connects the Temple Mount to events throughout human history: “It is universally accepted that the place on which David and Solomon built the Altar, the threshing floor of Ornan, is the location where Abraham built the Altar on which he prepared Isaac for sacrifice. Noah built [an altar] on that location when he left the ark. It was also [the place] of the Altar on which Cain and Abel brought sacrifices. [Similarly,] Adam, the first man, offered a sacrifice there and was created at that very spot, as our Sages said: ‘Man was created from the place where he [would find] atonement.’” (Laws of the Chosen House, 2:2) In his allusion to Noah’s sacrifice of thanks on that mountain, Maimonides echoes the words of the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 34:9) “Said Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov: [he offered his sacrifice on the place of] the great altar in Jerusalem—the same place that Adam brought an offering.”

In a September 16 speech, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas directly denied any Jewish connection with the Temple Mount when he declared, “Every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem is pure, every *shahid* [martyr] will reach paradise, and every injured person will be rewarded by God.” In that same speech Abbas said, “They [Jews] have no right to desecrate the mosque with their dirty feet, we won’t allow them to do that.” In his talk to the United Nations last month Abbas inflamed the incendiary Temple Mount issue by inaccurately claiming that the Israeli government used “brutal force to impose its plans to undermine the Islamic and Christian sanctities in Jerusalem.” Falsely, he argued that Israel was attempting to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, “dangerously transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a diplomatic one to a religious one.” Trumped up charges of “attacks” against Muslim holy sites decry the facts on the ground. In truth, Israel’s Temple Mount policy since 1967 has been to ban Jewish prayer. Jewish visitors are also prohibited from bringing prayer books or displaying national symbols on the Temple Mount. Israel has specifically committed itself to safeguarding access to the holy sites for the three monotheistic faiths in Jerusalem. In his recent speech at the United Nations Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu explicitly stated, “Israel is fully committed to... strictly maintaining the status quo on the Temple Mount and is committed to continuing to do so in accordance with the agreements between us and the Jordanians and the Waqf [Moslem religious council].”

For centuries, Jewish tradition emphasized the spiritual significance of both Jerusalem generally, and the Temple Mount specifically as one of the holiest sites in the Jewish religion. Ongoing attempts by leaders of the Palestinian Authority to deny this Jewish connection represent a dangerous development that not only denies the facts of history, but distorts Israel's efforts to maintain the Temple Mount as a peaceful place open to all people, no matter their religion or ethnicity. ■

A Deep Disconnect

For in the image of God He made man (Genesis 9:6) כי בצלם אלקים עשה את האדם (בראשית ט:ו)

Why did the terrorists who murdered Eitam and Naama Henkin not murder their four children, aged 9, 7, 4, and four months, who were strapped in the back of the car? The children survived not due a sense of humanity or compassion, but instead because one of the terrorists [accidentally shot another fellow terrorist by mistake](#) and the gunmen sped away in order to seek medical assistance for him. According to the [New York Times](#), Iyad al-Buzom, a spokesman for Hamas, praised the murder of the Henkins. “A greeting of glory and pride to the heroes who perpetrated this brave attack...” The Israeli news media reported that Palestinians in the West Bank city of Nablus were celebrating this terrorist act and these groups even went so far as to create a [truly disturbing animated YouTube video](#) that recreated and celebrated the killings. There is a deep disconnect between these two people, one that goes far deeper than politics, and reflects a glaring difference in perspective on the sanctity of human life.

After Noah emerged from the ark, he received a series of basic religious commandments known as the Seven Noahide Laws which Judaism considers obligatory for all of humanity. The final law prohibits murder of another human being: “Whoever sheds a person’s blood, that person’s blood shall blood be shed...for human beings were created in the image of God.” (9:6) What is the meaning of this unique term, “in the image of God” (“*b'tzelem Elokim*”)? As God has no form (a fundamental tenet of Jewish faith), how can humans be created “in God’s image?” Maimonides explained that this verse refers to our human intellect and self-awareness, which allows us to comprehend our own existence. Ramban argues that this phrase refers to the human soul—the spiritual-metaphysical element that can never be extinguished. Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk, in his commentary *Meshech Chochman* explains that the term refers the human power of free will to choose a path of good or a path of evil. Each of these interpretations highlights a core Jewish belief in the uniqueness of all human beings, who share an intellectual, spiritual and metaphysical element of godliness.

The notion that God created people in God’s image has served as a guiding principal not only for Judaism, but has influenced intellectuals and thinkers throughout history. The famous statement in America’s Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” stems directly from the Judaic teaching that every human being carries a spark of godliness within. The concept of *tzelem Elokim* also represents a core value of Israeli society, which works to protect and defend all lives. One of the basic values of the Israel Defense Forces taught to every Israeli soldier is the value of [Human Dignity](#): “The IDF and its soldiers are obligated to protect human dignity. Every human being is of value regardless of his or her origin, religion, nationality, gender, status or position.”

Good people around the world recoil not only at the heinous murders of Eitam and Naama Henkin, innocent civilians driving home from a holiday visit. We recoil at a society which seems to extoll such violence and praise those who would murder others in cold blood. There is a deep disconnect between an Israeli society that rushes wounded terrorists to the hospital for treatment and a Palestinian society whose official media describes a terrorist who murdered two people in cold blood as a “hero of our people,” and a mother in Gaza who “cried tears of joy” after [naming her newborn baby after a dead terrorist](#). Israelis honestly wonder whether peace is possible with a Palestinian Authority that continues to [pay salaries to convicted Hamas terrorists](#) sitting in jail.

This Shabbat, as every Shabbat, we will pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May she know peace and may the human dignity of her inhabitants be protected. ■