

AUGUST 10, 2015

Parashat Re'eh

Two Paths

A blessing and a curse (Deuteronomy 11:26)

ברכה וקללה (דברים יא:כו)

Yogi Berra, the famous baseball player and manager, has long been attributed with the saying, “when you come to a fork in the road, take it!” Salient advice, but how do you know which way to go? It’s possible that one path leads to danger and the other to reward. Making the wrong choice could have disastrous consequences.

Moses also addresses the question of two paths—two choices that lay before the Children of Israel after they enter the Holy Land: “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse...” (Deuteronomy 11:27) Two choices lay before the nation—the path of blessing—of righteousness, piety and merit and the path of the curse—of sin, degradation and ultimately, destruction. The choice seems obvious—take the path of merit! Why would Moses need to state the obvious? The Midrash notes that often seemingly “easy” choices are not all that easy. “This [choice] can be compared to the following parable of a person sitting at a fork in the road with two paths. One path began smoothly, but ultimately ended in rocks and thorns. The second began with thorns, but ended smoothly. A man stood at the fork in the road and told passing travelers: ‘You see this path that begins smoothly? The smooth road lasts two or three steps, and then you’ll find yourself walking on a thorny, painful road. You see this path that begins with thorns? In two or three steps, you’ll find yourself walking on a smooth, level road.’” [Sifrei Devarim 53]

Too often, the sinful path seems smooth and easy at first, while the path of righteousness seems rocky, thorny and difficult. Moses warns the nation that the smooth start on the sinful path is only an illusion. While it might begin easily, it quickly turns tumultuous, troublesome and painful. On the other hand, while making the proper decision might be more challenging at first, in time it proves to be the right choice, leading us to richer, more meaningful lives. This rule applies to so many areas of life, from business, to our interpersonal relationships, to our spirituality. Making the right choice—not to accept the shady financing, or engaging in honest dialogue, even when it is painful—can be difficult, especially at first. But in the long run, we recognize that the harder choice at the beginning leads to a smoother path further down the road.

This same rule applies to the choice our country faces with the Iran nuclear agreement. We feel like the confused traveler struggling to decide which road to take. Moses reminds us that the quick solution—the smooth initial path—leads to thorns down the road. Even if Iran never cheats on its nuclear agreement with the West—which given their past behavior is doubtful—and patiently follows the rules of the deal, it will still achieve a “legitimate” nuclear weapons capability. In eight years, or possibly sooner, Iran can legally begin expanding its ballistic missile program, while it also continues expanding its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program under the guise of satellite testing. In ten years, the U.N. resolution endorsing the deal terminates, giving Iran a legitimate and legal nuclear program, allowing the Islamic regime to conduct research on all types and numbers of centrifuges to rapidly enrich uranium. After fifteen years, all restrictions lift and Iran expands its industrial-sized nuclear program with near-zero breakout time, plutonium reprocessing, unlimited uranium enrichment, and a certified ballistic missile program.

Making the deal today seems to be the smooth path, yet while fifteen years might seem like a long time today, when we face a nuclear Iran in 2030, we will look back and wish we had chosen the seemingly thorny path by extending the sanctions and negotiating a better deal—one that will lead to a far better outcome in the future. ■

Protection from Weapons and Tongues (Haftarah)

No weapon formed against you shall prosper (Isaiah 54:17) כל כלי יוצר עליך לא יצלה (ישעיה נד:יז)

As part of the seven haftarot of consolation which we read over the seven Shabbatot following Tisha B'av, we recite Isaiah's prophesy of salvation and redemption. The prophet promises that, "No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against you in judgment you shall condemn; This is the heritage of the servants of Adonai..." (Isaiah 54:17) Isaiah mentions two specific ways that adversaries attack the nation of Israel: with the weapon and with the tongue— physical and verbal attacks. Nechama Leibowitz (see Studies in Devarim p. 156) notes that commentators throughout the ages interpreted the words of the prophets for their generations. She quotes Abravanel, the 15th Century Portuguese Jewish commentator, who applied Isaiah's words to the tribulations of his generation. He wrote, "On the one hand, there are religions today whose champions are not content to assert the supremacy of their faith by debate and argument, but put to death all who would repudiate their faith. The Ishmaelites fall into that category. There are others, though, who force their faith on [non-adherents] through polemics and argument: such are the Edomites (the "Church"). The prophet refers to both of them. 'No weapon forged against you shall prosper' through battle, as with Islam; 'and every tongue raised against you in judgment shall you condemn' through debate, disputation, as is the practice of the Church. For 'this is the heritage of the servants of Adonai and their righteousness,' that nothing will harm [the Children of Israel], neither by might nor power nor by scoffing and lying arguments."

Chillingly, the words of Isaiah continue to ring true especially today. While Jews no longer suffer from forced conversions, there are still many people around the world who attempt to harm the Jewish state both with physical weapons and with their tongues, spreading malice and hatred against Israel. Today, the strong, dedicated friendship of the United States brings the words of the prophet to light, offering protection to the people of Israel from those who attack Israel, whether by weapon or by tongue.

One way that America is helping Israel protect itself from physical weapons is the David's Sling anti-missile system. Last month, Israel's Ministry of Defense [announced that](#), "Israeli personnel began the first training course to operate the David's Sling air defense system." The six-month course was being jointly run by Israel's Homa administration, the program's main contractor Rafael, and the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, which is helping to develop the system. This follows a [successful test of the system earlier this year](#) which was created to provide an additional layer of defense from short and medium range missiles and rockets. Yair Ramati, head of Homa, said that the "system is intended in its first edition to intercept—with one look—the core threats from Lebanon." Ramati emphasized the close U.S.-Israel cooperation on the project. "The trials were attended by the American representatives who are full partners in the project; we have even asked for an increase in the aid budget for next year in all matters related to stocking the interceptor missiles, parts of which are manufactured here, with other parts made in a factory in the U.S.A."

The United States also works to protect Israel from those who use the tongue to try and malign the Jewish state. According to [the Forward](#), last week the top Republican and Democrat on the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee introduced a resolution urging the Obama administration to increase its activities against any boycott of Israel. The non-binding resolution, introduced July 30 by Reps. Ed Royce (R-Calif.) and Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), respectively the chairman and ranking member of the committee, calls on the administration "to increase the use of its voice, vote and influence in international organizations and other appropriate international forums to actively oppose politically motivated acts of boycott, divestment from and sanctions against Israel."

Thousands of years ago, Isaiah foretold of a time when the people of Israel would be protected from both physical and verbal attack. Today, American support for Israel serves as a fulfillment of the words of the prophet, as the United States works tirelessly to protect and defend the Jewish state. ■