



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 8, 2015

Parashat Shelach

Protecting the Land

Whether there is wood therein (Numbers 13:20)

היש בה עץ (במדבר יג:כ)

Rabbi Naim ben Eliyahu was a kabbalist who served as the rabbi of the Bucharim neighborhood and the head of the Ben Ish Hai yeshiva in Jerusalem. He told the following story: There once was, in the old city of Jerusalem, an honored family blessed with eight children. They had a large, old, earthenware pot—a vat really—with which the matron made a *chamin*—a Shabbat stew—each week. This pot was incredibly old, and the woman always wondered: how is it that this pot has never broken? There was an old pauper in the neighborhood that, each and every Shabbat afternoon, would come and eat the leftover rice at the bottom of the old pot. He didn't want a spoon or a plate. He just sat and ate straight from the pot, for an hour or two. This practice continued for many years. One Sunday morning, as the woman washed the huge old vat, it finally broke. When she told her husband that the pot had finally broken after so many years, he immediately put on his coat, and began to run. His son followed, and they ran together to the house of that poor man, and discovered that he had passed on to the next world. Since he no longer needed it, the pot broke. His merit had guarded the fragile pot for those many years.

This, said Rabbi Eliyahu, is the meaning of a comment in Rashi at the beginning of the Parashah. When Moses charged the spies with their mission to scout out the Holy Land, he requested specific details about the Land. Among his questions, he asked them to report: “and what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood therein, or not?” (13:20) Yet, we may wonder: Why is the nature of the land, and whether it has wood, relevant to the military mission of conquest? To answer this question, Rashi (on verse 20) explains that Moses was asking a hidden, deeper question. He wanted to know, “Is there among them an honorable man who will protect them by his merit?” According to the Talmud (Baba Batra 15a), Moses wanted to know whether the land was inhabited by a person so great that his merit shaded and shielded the people of his land like a tree. Rabbinic legend teaches that Job, a man of great generosity and kindness, had lived in the land at the time, but passed away before the Israelites arrived. Thus, no person remained whose merit would protect the people of Canaan from the Children of Israel.

Today, there too may be spiritually great individuals whose merit offers protection for the Holy Land, but there are additionally great people who work tirelessly to protect and defend the interests of the Jewish state.

According to a recent article in Foreign Policy Magazine entitled “[Israel's Shield](#),” U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, “has appealed to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to remove Israel from a draft U.N. rogues list of government forces, rebel movements, and terrorist organizations accused of violating children's rights in the midst of conflict. Power's outreach is intended to prevent a crucial ally of the United States from being included on a U.N. list of shame, which is reserved for pariah states like Syria and Sudan as well as rebel and terrorist organizations, including Boko Haram, the Islamic State and the Taliban.”

In 2001, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1379 instructed the U.N. secretary-general to issue an annual report detailing abuses against children caught up in the middle of war. The latest draft report, which was written primarily by Leila Zerrougui, the U.N. chief's special representative for children and armed conflict, includes an annex with a list of countries and non-state armed groups that have recruited, killed, maimed, or sexually abused children, or that have launched attacks on schools or hospitals. Last year, the annex listed 59 armed groups, including several ethnic

militias and terrorist organizations, as well as eight government forces: the Afghan police and the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This year, Zerrougi's draft report included both Israel and Hamas in the annex as well. According to Emmanuel Nahshon of Israel's Foreign Ministry, the efforts of countries who want to include Israel in the worst possible list represents a "heinous and hypocritical attempt to besmirch the image of Israel." Thankfully, America has offered strong support to remove Israel from the final report, which will be issued in June. According to Foreign Policy, "The American effort underscores the degree to which the United States continues to defend Israel at the United Nations." ■

Half-Truths

And surely it flows with milk and honey (Numbers 13:27)

וגם זבת חלב ודבש הוא (במדבר יג:כז)

Merriam Webster [defines the term "half-truth"](#) as "a statement that mingles truth and falsehood with deliberate intent to deceive." Evidence indicates that Iran has been making half-true statements, as it continues to develop its nuclear weapons program.

Last week, the New York Times [reported](#), "international inspectors have reported that Tehran's stockpile of nuclear fuel increased about 20 percent over the last 18 months of negotiations, partially undercutting the Obama administration's contention that the Iranian program had been 'frozen' during that period." The Iranians clearly have a different understanding of the term "frozen." Iran has long claimed that it halted its nuclear program, and the IAEA seemed to confirm that fact, for "The agency's inspectors, who have had almost daily access to most of Iran's nuclear production facilities, reported finding no evidence that Iran was racing toward a nuclear weapon, and said Tehran had halted work on facilities that could have given it bomb-making capabilities." Where then did the additional uranium come from? How could there be twenty percent more uranium, if Iran hasn't been producing it? Clearly Iran hasn't been completely forthright. They have been deliberately telling half-truths, hoping to deceive the international community.

Moses confronted precisely the same problem. When the spies returned to the Israelite camp in the desert ready to present their pessimistic, negative report about the Promised Land, they faced a critical problem. How could they convince the people to believe them? After all, Moses had long extolled the virtues of the Land of Milk and Honey. According to Rashi, they used a simple but effective tactic: half-truths. When they returned from their forty-day foray into Canaan they showed everyone the giant grapes they cut from the Land and announce that, "We came to the land to which you sent us, and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it!" (verse 27) Then they let the hammer fall, declaring the nation could never successfully vanquish the giants inhabiting the land. Rashi wonders: why did they begin by speaking positively about the Land of Milk and Honey? Why praise the Land when, in the next breath, they intend to badmouth the land? He explains "[They stated this because] every false thing regarding which there is not said some true things at first will not be established in the end." (Rashi on 13:27) In order to get the people to believe the lies, they must first tell a little bit of truth. They must tell half-truths.

Iran's decades-long history of cheating on international obligations strongly suggests it will secretly attempt to continue its nuclear weapons program even after it reaches a comprehensive deal with the international community. For this reason, Iran cannot be permitted any safe havens where it could pursue this ambition. Moreover, any agreement must empower the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct robust and intrusive short-notice inspections of any site—declared or undeclared—including all military locations. No facilities can be off-limits, in order to verify that Iran is abiding by its commitments and not conducting illicit nuclear activities.

As the United States engages in intense negotiations to reach a final deal with Iran, Iran's long history of telling half-truths reinforces the need for the agreement to be ironclad, and support "anytime, anywhere" inspections—including all military facilities—to verify Iranian compliance. Anything less would be a half-truth, giving Iran further cover to continue its covert race to build a nuclear weapon. ■