



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 5, 2015

Parashat Shemot

A Tale of Two Trips

And they set over them fiscal officers (Exodus 1:11)

וישימו עליו שרי מסים (שמות א:יא)

Mustafa Hbub, a Palestinian living in Israel, dreamed of a bus trip that would allow West Bank Palestinians to visit Israeli communities and take home a message of peace. “The war [this past summer] caused destruction for both Israelis and Arabs. Let’s stop this. Peace is done by people, not leaders,” Hbub said. With help from Buma Inbar, a Jewish Israeli involved in efforts to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, Hbub gathered nearly fifty Palestinians for a one-day trip. Yet, as [NPR reported](#), when they saw TV cameras at their first stop, the Palestinians refused to be filmed. A Palestinian woman named Alin explained that “When you say Israelis and Palestinian are together, it’s not nice and it’s not acceptable.” To many Palestinians, normalization, rather than being a positive, is “a real insult”.

American Donna Stefano, Mideast Office Director of Seeds of Peace, says anti-normalization pressure has a real impact on Palestinians. “When they return from camp, and they try to explain the powerful personal transformation that they’ve had, it just gets thrown back in their face that, ‘It’s normalization, it’s normalization. You’re a traitor talking to Israelis, you shouldn’t be talking to Israelis...An identity [is] formed through a very strong national narrative, and that national narrative often doesn’t recognize the needs or the humanness, the humanity of the other.’” Rather than normalization, many Palestinians choose alienation.

Pharaoh made the same choice in a concerted effort to demonize and ultimately enslave the Jewish nation. The initial verses of Shemot chronicle the rapid deterioration of the relationship between Egypt and the Israelites. How could a ruler encourage his subjects to enslave an entire people, one of whom – Joseph – had literally saved the country from collapse? Pharaoh’s effort to alienate the Jews, writes Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, began with a tax: “They set over them fiscal officers in order to afflict them” (1:11). Hirsch writes, “The Jews in general were declared to be an object for revenue...they were to be regarded as ‘foreigners who do not belong here’, and as such must pay any price demanded for the air they breathe... the real reason [for the tax] was ‘in order to afflict them.’” The taxation led to enslavement and the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. But slavery could not have taken hold without alienation. Hirsch (v. 14) adds, “The root and beginning of this indescribable maltreatment was *geirut* (strangeness) – the supposed lack of rights as a foreigner.”

This deliberate policy of alienation mirrors another planned Palestinian bus trip that never materialized. According to the [New York Times](#), when a bus carrying 37 war orphans from Gaza reached the Erez border crossing for a planned visit to Israel, Hamas authorities turned them back. The trip was to include visits to Tel Aviv and Jaffa, a safari park, a school, and a kibbutz near the border with Gaza. It was organized by Yoel Marshak, a leader of the Kibbutz Movement’s task force, who said the orphans included the children of Hamas fighters who were killed during the 50-day war with Israel this summer. “In 20 or 30 years, these children will be the leaders in Gaza,” Mr. Marshak said. “The idea was to give them a positive experience in Israel.” That, it seems, was precisely why Hamas obstructed the trip. “This was a suspicious visit that aimed to normalize our children with the Zionist occupation,” Eyad al-Buzom, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry in Gaza, said... “In order to protect our sons, we prevented them from visiting the occupation,” he said, referring to Israel. Mr. Buzom refused to elaborate, but said that all “dangerous” trips of this nature would be prevented in the future.

Before peace can become a possibility, Palestinians must first seek normal interactions with Israelis in their daily life. Rather than seeing it as a threat, they must recognize that normalization with Israel represents the greatest hope for peace and stability. Sadly, too many Palestinians choose alienation and demonization of Israel instead. ■

Got Your Back

For I will be with you (Exodus 3:12)

כי אהיה עמך (שמות ג:יב)

Moses is clearly anxious. Standing at the burning bush in Midian contemplating his return to Egypt to demand the release of the Jews from bondage, Moses asks God, “Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (3:11) To this question God answers: “Certainly I will be with you” (verse 12). Rashi (on verse 12) explains that Moses feels unqualified to fulfill the task. To address this concern God tells him, “It is not your own going, but mine – ‘for I will be with you.’” [Rabbi Amy Levin](#) offers a different interpretation. She explains that rather than feeling inadequate, Moses fears confronting Pharaoh alone. To ease this anxiety God tells Moses “I will be with you.” Rabbi Levin writes that God tells Moses, “Don’t worry, you’ve got the ultimate team leader to guide you, to inspire you. I’ve got your back.”

Israel often faces this very same prospect of going it alone. Situated in a region surrounded by adversaries actively planning its destruction, Israel faces constant threats to the safety of its citizens. In the international arena, countries from around the world unite to pass resolutions condemning and delegitimizing Israel. However, thanks to passionate Americans dedicated to a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, Israel doesn’t have to face these challenges alone. America truly does have Israel’s back.

On his recent trip to the Holy Land, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) expressed the United States’ unwavering support for Israel during a joint conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “I wanted to come here in the most desperate way before the new Congress reconvenes, to let you and the people of Israel know that the United States Congress, above all entities in America, has your back in a very bipartisan way,” said Graham. “You can count on the United States Congress, Republican and Democrat, to be there for you when you need us the most.” Graham also emphasized Congress’ recent bipartisan resolutions that reaffirmed Israel’s right to defend itself against Hamas’ terrorism. In doing so, Senator Graham echoed a sentiment [articulated by President Obama](#) in 2012, who insisted that the United States will “always have Israel’s back’ when it comes to security. Over the past several months, the Obama Administration has followed through on this commitment with concrete action. The recently passed budget agreement [included](#) \$3.1 billion in total aid for Israel plus an additional \$619.8 million in defense aid. Last month, the President [signed into law](#) the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Act which significantly deepens the relationship between our two countries and enhances Israel’s security. Finally, the Obama Administration [took decisive action](#) to prevent the adoption of a counterproductive United Nations Security Council resolution which would have damaged the prospects of a resumption of the Israel-Palestinian peace process.

We recognize that this support stems from the hard work that we do to educate our elected officials about the importance of a strong Jewish State. Their dedication to Israel reflects our passion. We must never allow ourselves to take America’s strong support for Israel for granted. Rather, we must recognize that as American Jews committed to a secure Israel, we too must always be willing and ready to stand up on behalf of the Jewish State and say, “We’ve got your back.” ■

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