



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 4, 2016

Parashat Vaera

Recognizing the Good

Say to Aaron... (Exodus 7:19)

אמור אל אהרן (שמות ז:יט)

Before his visit to the White House where he lit the Hanukkah candles with President Obama, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin explained the rationale behind his visit. Describing the connection between the countries [he said](#), “It is the bond between two countries, and between two peoples, and I intend to express to the [U.S.] president, in the name of all the people [of Israel], Israel’s appreciation for the uncompromising support of the United States, in each moment, and in every situation.” In his remarks to the President, Rivlin [did exactly that](#) when he said, “And we would like, at the same time, to really thank you from the bottom of our heart, the people of Israel, about what you have done in the last six years for the finance, for the diplomatic and for the military help that you are giving us. You are making us able to stand against threats of today and of tomorrow.”

In Hebrew, expressing thanks is called “*hakarat hatov*”—recognizing and appreciating the good. While normally we express our thanks through words, Moses and Aaron taught us that we can express our appreciation through our actions as well. In the commandment to initiate the plague of blood which would contaminate the Nile River, Moses is told, “Say to Aaron: Take your rod, and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt...” (verse 19) Why was Aaron instructed to stretch his rod and afflict the Nile rather than Moses? Rashi explains: “Since the river offered protection to Moses when he was cast into it, therefore it was not smitten by his hand, neither with the plague of blood nor with frogs...” The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 20:1) adds a beautiful, personal element to the story, explaining that initially Moses himself was commanded to strike the Nile. “Said Moses [to God]: I cannot! Can a person drink from a well and then cast a stone into that well?” By refusing to harm the body of water that saved him, Moses demonstrated this elemental value of *hakarat hatov*, recognizing and appreciating the source of kindness in every situation.

Rabbi A.Y. Hakohen Kook (see *Ein Ayah Berachot* 46:7) describes this virtue of recognizing goodness as, “the foundation of the physical and spiritual worlds in our ethical spheres and all of its improvements.” Rav Kook taught that while expressing our appreciation for acts of kindness is a moral and appropriate act, the attribute is critical for our spiritual development as well. We can only express appreciation when we recognize (i.e. identify) acts of kindness in the world, and that can only happen when we’re looking to see goodness around us in the world and in the actions of others. *Hakarat hatov* demands not only that we say thank you, but that we view the world with a positive outlook, searching for goodness around us.

This desire to express *hakarat hatov* goes both ways. Just as Israel expresses its gratitude to the United States for America’s continued support, other nations express their appreciation to Israel for its assistance. Recently, Armah Zolu Jallah, the President of Liberia’s Senate visited the Knesset in Jerusalem and used the opportunity to thank the Jewish State for its assistance in helping Liberia halt a dangerous Ebola outbreak. The website Israel21c [reported](#), “In 2014, Israel sent aid—mobile clinics, training of medical teams and visits by Israeli medical experts—to Liberia to help halt the severe Ebola outbreak there. Jallah, who made history by becoming the first president of the upper house of the bicameral Liberian legislature to visit the Knesset, also told [Knesset Speaker Yuli] Edelstein that his country greatly admires Israel for its innovation, technology, agriculture and medical research.” In response, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein told Jallah, “I am proud that we did our part and helped Liberia become free of Ebola. It is a world interest to which the State of Israel is a partner.” ■

Working Together

Very heavy hail (Exodus 9:18)

ברך כבוד מאד (שמות ט:יח)

According to this week's parsha, the hail that fell during the plague of hail wasn't your garden-variety type. Rather, "Adonai sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down unto the earth." (9:23) Rashi (on verse 24) explains that the plague of hail represented a, "miracle within a miracle— fire and hail mixed together...in order to fulfill the divine will, they made peace between them." The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:8) explains that this plague demonstrated God's dominion over nature, and the ability to combine seemingly opposite forces in nature. The Midrash offers the following parable: A king rules over two dukes who cannot tolerate one-another, yet serve their king loyally. Normally, the king suffers their discord without comment. Yet, when the time comes for the king to go to war, they must reconcile in order to fight together on his behalf. The same rule applied to the fire and water. Normally, they're at each other's throats: the fire burns while the water douses. Yet, when they were called into action [for the hail], they united to work together.

In many ways, our two political parties can be compared to fire and water. You cannot live without fire or water – both represent critical elements essential to human life. Yet, they don't get along well together in nature. Democrats and Republicans offer critical perspectives within American politics. Our two party system has faithfully represented a broad range of American values for nearly 250 years. And, throughout American history, they have not often gotten along well together. Nonetheless, just as the fire and water joined together to "fulfill the divine will," Democrats and Republicans put aside their differences when supporting the Jewish State.

It is crucial that bipartisan support for Israel remain a cornerstone of American foreign policy. That is why it was so gratifying to see members of Congress from both sides of the aisle work together to support legislation that will bolster and enhance Israel's security. On December 16, [President Obama signed into law](#) the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 after it was passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 425 to 0 following its passage in November by unanimous consent in the Senate. The bill provides an important tool against Iranian aggression by cutting off Hezbollah, Iran's terrorist proxy, from the international finance system by forcing international financial institutions to choose between doing business with Hezbollah or with the United States. The bill also allows sanctions on foreign financial institutions that knowingly facilitate the activities of the terrorist group by providing financial services. White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest praised the law...describing it as a "strong, bipartisan bill." "We continue to work with Congress in a bipartisan way to ensure that we maximize the tools available to us to thwart Hezbollah's network at every turn, and we look forward to working together as we implement these new authorities," Earnest said.

Asked during a recent tour about the issue of partisan relationships between the United States and Israel, Naftali Bennett, Israel's Education Minister [said](#), "We are fully bipartisan. We don't support any particular party," Bennett replied. "We are thankful and grateful to America, who, clearly, is our biggest and best friend in the world. And I think many Americans can appreciate the uphill battle we are fighting – just to exist – in a very tough neighborhood. So, I think that goes way deeper than any local disagreements."

Israelis and Americans alike recognize that just as fire and water joined forces to create the powerful hail, we too must put political differences aside to ensure that the relationship between the United States and Israel remains a source of strength and stability for the Jewish State. ■

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