

JULY 27, 2015

Parashat Va'etchanan – Shabbat Nachamu

Choosing Provocation

To provoke Him (Deuteronomy 4:25)

להכעיסו (דברים ד:כה)

In the fable attributed to Aesop, *The Bear and the Bees*, a bear was stung by a bee; the pain was so acute that in the madness of revenge, he ran into a garden and overturned a hive. This outrage greatly provoked the bee's anger and quick as a wink, the entire swarm of bees flew out of the log and began to sting the bear from head to heel. This fable reminds us that provocation evokes a response—usually one that will ultimately cause unwanted suffering.

It is precisely this type of provocation that Moses predicts will ultimately trip up the Children of Israel. In his final address to the nation, Moses repeatedly warns the people to remember the covenant at Sinai and to adhere to it once they settle in the Promised Land. Should the people go back on their agreement to adhere to the Divine statutes, they will suffer great consequences. “Take heed unto yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Adonai your God...” (4:23) Moses predicts that over time, the nation would indeed forget its prior commitments, “and shall do that which is evil in the sight of the Adonai your God, to provoke Him.” (4:25) Moses warns the people that this would provoke an immediate and harsh response from God.

According to the Midrash (*Devarim Rabbah*), Moses saw that the people would insolently seek the most provocative, sinful behavior in a deliberate attempt to anger God. “This [word] ‘provocation’ teaches us that [the people] would attempt to see which action [most] angered the Holy One, and then they would do it.” Had the people merely sinned in error, they could have been forgiven. Their desire to provoke and intentionally break the covenant with God merited the harsh response.

Only days after signing the agreement with the international community to curb its nuclear program, Iran similarly provokes the world, making statements that not only threaten peace, but directly contradict both the spirit and the letter of the agreement itself. [Time Magazine](#) reported that in his first public address following the signing of the agreement, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that a landmark nuclear deal won't change his country's policy toward the “arrogant” U.S. In another speech punctuated by chants of “Death to America” and “Death to Israel,” Khamenei reiterated Iran's commitment to supporting its neighbors, including Hezbollah, Hamas and Syria, and described Israel as a “terrorist, baby-killer government.” Additionally, according to the [Times of Israel](#), Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan said despite the nuclear deal's terms, “Tehran would not allow international inspectors to enter the Islamic Republic's military sites.” These comments appear at odds with the terms of the nuclear deal struck with the P5+1 last week and shed doubt on Tehran's willingness to keep to some of the concessions agreed to in the pact. Dehghan also insisted that Iran would continue to develop ballistic missile technology, giving Iran the ability to strike from thousands of miles away.

In its insistence that it will not adhere to either the letter or the spirit of the agreement it signed only weeks ago, Iran seems determined to provoke continued conflict with the international community. It is up to us to [remind our elected representatives](#) in the House and Senate that ignoring Iran's deliberate provocations will imperil not just Israel, but the United States as well. ■

Seeing Consolation in the Struggle – Shabbat Nachamu

All who mourn for Jerusalem (Ta'anit 30)

כל המתאבל על ירושלים (תענית ל')

Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Akiva went up to Jerusalem. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. The others started weeping, yet Rabbi Akiva laughed.

Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria and Rabbi Joshua asked Rabbi Akiva, “Why are you laughing?”

Rabbi Akiva responded asking, “Why are you weeping?”

They explained to Rabbi Akiva that, “A place [so holy] that it is said of it, ‘the stranger that approaches it shall die,’ (Numbers 1:51) and now foxes traverse it, and we shouldn’t weep?”

Rabbi Akiva then explained that alongside the prophecy that the Temple will be destroyed was the prophecy that the Temple will be rebuilt and the Jewish people redeemed. “Until I saw that the prophecy of doom was fulfilled I thought that it was not meant literally. However, now that I see that the negative prophecy is fulfilled literally, then I know that the positive prophecy will also be fulfilled literally. From the bad I see the good. From the troubles I see the redemption.”

With these words they replied to him: “Akiva, you have consoled us! Akiva, you have consoled us!” (Talmud Makkot 24b)

The Sages’ words of double consolation echo the famous opening phrase of our Haftarah—*Nachamu nachamu ami*—“Comfort you, comfort you My people...” (Isaiah 40:1) Like in the story of Rabbi Akiva, this consolation comes not from witnessing joy, but from witnessing pain. The prophet, foreseeing the destruction of Jerusalem, declares that the holy city has paid “double for all her sins” (ibid) and will therefore one day be redeemed. These powerful words of consolation, remind us that we must always see the positive, even in times of struggle, and that sometimes our greatest trials offer us the best view of the blessings we now enjoy.

Nowhere is this truer than the strong relationship between the United States and Israel. The continued connection between our two countries, despite occasional disagreement, demonstrates just how strong the bond truly is. Even as President Obama called to inform Prime Minister Netanyahu about the signing of the nuclear agreement with Iran, USA Today [reported](#) that he “underscored his administration’s stalwart commitment to Israel’s security.”

Last week, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited Israel for security consultations, reflecting the unprecedented level of security cooperation between the United States and Israel. During the meeting, Carter highlighted the years of close friendship between the U.S. and Israel and described Israel as a “critical friend” and “a critical ally.” He also affirmed that the Jewish state’s qualitative military edge over its adversaries will be maintained. [Carter is the first Obama administration](#) official to visit Israel following the announcement of the Iran nuclear agreement. According the White House, “The visit offers a further opportunity to continue our close consultation on security issues with Israeli counterparts as we remain vigilant in countering the Iranian regime’s destabilizing activities in the region.” Israel’s Interior Minister and Vice Premier Silvan Shalom, a critic of the Iran deal, stressed the strong relations Israel enjoys with the United States. [The Jerusalem Post noted](#), “Despite the deep disagreements surrounding the Iran deal... [Shalom] argued that the bipartisan support for Israel in the U.S. was ‘based on common values and common interests. Common values like democracy, like freedom, like human rights, like rule of law.... Israel is the best ally that the United States has and will ever have.’”

As opponents of the bad deal with Iran, we have much to be concerned about. Yet, in times of tension there is also an opportunity for consolation. The disagreement over the Iranian nuclear deal and the reaction of leaders in both Jerusalem and Washington reminds us that the bond between Israel and the United States will remain as strong as ever. ■

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