



Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 21, 2015

Parashat Vayechi

The Blessings of Jacob

And the Egyptians wept for him (Genesis 50:3)

ויבכו אותו מצרים (בראשית נ:ג)

In a 2011 talk with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Andrew J. Shapiro, the State Department Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs spoke about America's interest in maintaining Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, especially in a challenging fiscal era. He [said](#), "Some are now asking the question why we should keep providing aid to Israel? Yes, Israel is a long-time democratic ally and we share a special bond—but some skeptics are questioning whether that's enough of reason to continue to spend hard earned American tax payer dollars on Israel's security. I can answer that skepticism directly—we don't just support Israel because of a long standing bond, we support Israel because it is in our national interests to do so. This aspect of our relationship with Israel is often overlooked. America's commitment to Israel's security and prosperity has extended over many decades because our leaders on both sides of the aisle have long understood that a robust United States-Israel security relationship is in our interests. Our support for Israel's security helps preserve peace and stability in the region. If Israel were weaker, its enemies would be bolder. This would make broader conflict more likely, which would be catastrophic to American interests in the region. It is the very strength of Israel's military which deters potential aggressors and helps foster peace and stability. Ensuring Israel's military strength and its superiority in the region, is therefore critical to regional stability and as a result is fundamentally a core interest of the United States."

The people of America have long supported Israel because of the tangible benefits that Israel gives to the United States. Similarly, in Parashat Vayechi, the people of ancient Egypt appreciate the benefits that Jacob and his family brought to their nation. We learn of their appreciation from their reaction to the passing of Jacob. We can readily appreciate that Joseph and his brothers mourn for Jacob. Yet, why would the entire nation of Egypt weep for Jacob "for seventy days?" (verse 3) Rashi (on verse 3) explains that they mourned the patriarch because his presence in their country brought great blessing for them as well. "There came to [the Egyptians] a blessing on his arrival: the famine ceased and the waters of the Nile were blessed." Siftei Chachamim notes that they mourned not out of respect for Joseph, but as a genuine spontaneous outpouring of emotion for Jacob's passing, demonstrating the appreciation of the people of Egypt for the blessings that Jacob's presence had brought to their country.

This past Friday was an important day for the U.S.-Israel relationship, Congress passed its annual spending bill, which includes several measures that significantly enhance America's commitment to Israel's safety. Key pro-Israel provisions within this bill include \$3.1 billion in U.S. security assistance to Israel. This ensures that Israel has the means to defend herself against mounting threats. It also reflects the full amount committed to Israel under the 2007 U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding. The spending bill also grants Israel [\\$487 million for U.S.-Israel missile defense programs](#). This number more than triples the president's budget request for fiscal year 2016. Additionally, Israel will receive \$40 million for a new U.S.-Israel tunnel detection program. This breakthrough initiative will directly help Israel combat the growing threat of underground terrorist tunnels from Gaza and Lebanon. Together, these funds will provide essential resources for Israel to help keep her citizens safe.

Just as the blessings of Jacob brought benefits to the people of Egypt, U.S. foreign aid brings tangible benefits to the people of the United States. We must continue to promote this important message and thank our elected official for their support for critical U.S. military aid for the Jewish state. ■

Making Change for Peace

Your father commanded (Genesis 50:16)

אביך צוה (בראשית נ:טז)

On November 20, 1977, then Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, flew from Egypt to Israel to give one of the most historic speeches ever delivered at the Knesset. The visit set in motion a series of events and negotiations that led to the first peace treaty signed between Israel and an Arab state. Addressing the 120 Knesset members, Sadat declared that he had come to Israel not to conduct another withdrawal of forces agreement or make a partial peace. “Today I tell you, and declare it to the whole world, that we accept to live with you in permanent peace based on justice,” Sadat said. More powerful than his words were Sadat’s actions: His visit to Israel spoke volumes about his sincerity and paved the way for the peace treaty that has brought stability between Israel and Egypt for almost forty years.

The Ten Commandments teach us that we must not lie, and in the Talmud (Shabbat 55a) we learn that, “Rabbi Chanina said: The seal of the Holy One is Truth.” Yet, Parshat Vayechi demonstrates that we can sometimes justify telling a “white lie” to achieve the greater good of peace. After the funeral and burial of Jacob in Canaan, Joseph’s brothers now fear that with Jacob gone, Joseph can finally exact revenge for their terrible crime of selling him into slavery. They approach him with the following request: “Your father commanded before he died, saying: ‘So shall you say to Joseph: Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for that they did to you evil...’” (Genesis 50:16-17) There’s only one problem with their message—we find no record of such a command on Jacob’s part. It’s doubtful that Jacob ever really discovered the full truth about what happened to Joseph. How then could he command Joseph to forgive his brothers for a sin he knew nothing about? Rashi (on verse 16) answers simply: *Shinu badavar mipnei hashalom* — “they modified [the words of Jacob] in this matter in the interest of peace.” They lied, putting words in the name of their father—for the laudable goal of creating harmony within the family [*shalom bayit*]. From the brothers’ example, the Talmud (Yevamot 65b) derives that *mutar leshanot*, “One is permitted to change [the truth] for the sake of peace.”

We must also read another crucial lesson about creating peace by rereading these words in another way: *mutar leshanot*—one is permitted to change [oneself]—for the sake of peace. Discord and strife represent the collision between opposing perspectives, viewpoints and attitudes. In order to achieve peace, at least one side must change, moderate and reevaluate. Joseph’s brothers didn’t simply lie to create peace; they changed themselves, subjugating themselves and surrendering their pride for the sake of family harmony. How often do we fall prey to this fatal failure, clinging to the stubborn belief that especially in matters of dispute, change is forbidden? *Mutar leshanot*—change is permitted; we can soften our hard-headedness and modify our positions—and that will help bring peace. Moreover, As Sadat demonstrated, peace demands change in both attitude and in actions. If we want to appreciate whether an adversary truly has peaceful intentions, we must not only listen to his words but also evaluate whether he has changed his deeds.

For this reason, many in the international community have expressed concern about a broad range of Iranian activity, especially after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) last summer. Despite its insistence on its peaceful motivations, Iran continues to violate international law and destabilize the Middle East with a flurry of dangerous and threatening behavior. In the months since the signing of the agreement with the P5+1 nations, Iran has [funded a Bahraini terrorist group](#), [hacked email and social media accounts](#) of Obama administration officials, [arrested and detained Americans in Iran](#), and most disturbingly, [fired a medium-range ballistic missile](#) in October which violated a [UN Security Council resolution](#) banning the Islamic Republic for eight years from “any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology.”

Iran’s dangerous activities demonstrate that it is not yet willing to change and will continue to flout the will of the international community. Iran’s intransigence only underscores the need for the United States to carefully monitor Iran’s compliance with the deal and ensure the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism cannot develop nuclear weapons. ■