



Sermon Tidbits

SEPTEMBER 16, 2015

Parashat Vayelech – Shabbat Shuvah

Much More to Do

Return, O Israel (Hosea 14:2)

שובה ישראל... (הושע יד:ב)

The Sages call this week “Shabbat Shuvah”—the “Sabbath of Return”—named after the first word of this week’s haftarah, in which the prophet Hosea enjoins the people of Israel to repent from their evil ways and return to God. Yet, when we think about it, we should have read this haftarah *last* week. After all, traditionally, we call Rosh Hashanah the “Yom Hadin”—the Day of Judgment. The Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah (2:1) teaches us that, “At four seasons [divine] judgment is passed on the world...on Rosh Hashanah all creatures pass before [God]...” According to the Sages, we’ve already been judged. All that’s left is for that judgment to be signed and sealed on Yom Kippur.

Why didn’t we have this Shabbat—this sermon—a week ago, before Rosh Hashanah? The answer to this question lies in a story about King Hezekiah. The Talmud (Brachot 10a) relates a chilling conversation between the prophet Isaiah and the King Hezekiah as the king lay sick in bed. The prophet told the king that he would die for failing to engage in the mitzvah of procreation. When the king expressed remorse for his sin and asked for the prophet’s daughter to wed, Isaiah told him, “The decree [of death] has already been decreed.” Hezekiah refused to accept the prophet’s decree, declaring that, “I received [the tradition passed down] from my grandfather [King David]: Even if a sharp sword is hanging over one’s neck, a person should never hold himself back from [asking for] forgiveness.” Hezekiah was indeed correct. God accepted his repentance and he recovered from his illness. Rabbi Nadia Siritsky [adds to this idea](#), “We are capable of far more than we believe. Too often, we give up before we even try. Our Torah portion for this week speaks to this message of Shabbat Shuvah, this reminder that God is always waiting for us to return to our truest selves—the parts of us that are still capable of faith and hope, despite the cynicism and hurt that the year may have brought us.”

While the recent Senate filibuster meant a resolution of disapproval would not be sent to the president, the months of debate served to highlight the danger Iran poses to the world, turning the issue into a critical aspect of American foreign policy. Moreover, the focus on Iran over the summer clarified a critical fact: while the two sides of this debate disagreed over the efficacy of the nuclear agreement and the best way to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons, Americans, regardless of political affiliation, [overwhelmingly agree](#) that a nuclear Iran would present a grave threat to the world, and that we must, therefore, do our utmost to prevent the Islamic Republic from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

As the nuclear deal will now move forward, it is imperative that we work with Congress on a broad agenda to respond to the dangers posed by this agreement: (1) to establish congressional oversight and monitoring of the agreement; (2) to take steps to clarify U.S. commitments to America’s allies and strengthen the American ability to enforce the agreement; (3) to develop a new strategy working with Israel and our Arab allies to counter Iranian aggression in the region; and (4) to enhance Israel’s security and deepen the vital U.S.-Israel strategic partnership.

George Eliot once said, “It is never too late to be what you might have been.” Shabbat Shuvah reminds us that even after we have been judged, there is still much more that we can, and must, do. Even a sinner, judged unfavorably on Rosh Hashanah, has the opportunity during these Ten Days of Repentance to change and return to his or her better

self. If a sinner can have hope of redemption, how wrong it would be for *us* to lose our hope in preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. So, on this Shabbat Shuvah, let us “return” our attention to what is most important—ensuring that 5776 and the years that follow bring safety and security to the United States, Israel, and our allies around the world, free from the threat of a nuclear Iran. ■

Willing to Travel

And Moses went (Deuteronomy 31:1)

וילך משה (דברים לא:א)

Recently, a Palestinian resident of Hebron, at great personal risk, prevented an international incident and saved the lives of five innocent American students. The yeshiva students, driving their rental car towards the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, accidentally took a wrong turn and found themselves driving in Palestinian-controlled territory, and were soon attacked by a mob hurling stones and firebombs, the [New York Times reported](#). Fayez Abu Hamdiyeh, of the Jabel Johar neighborhood of Hebron, spotted the fleeing students, took them into his home to protect them, and called the Israeli police to rescue them. During the forty-minute wait for the police to arrive, Abu Hamdiyeh tended to a wounded student, gave them drinks, and assured them that they were safe. Abu Hamdiyeh took a great risk to save these students. He could easily have been labeled a collaborator and targeted for helping Israel. Yet, in the heat of the moment, he made the difficult, but proper choice.

At the outset of this week’s parashah we read that “Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel...” (31:1) Where did he go? Wasn’t he just speaking with the people? Why did he need to go anywhere? Ramban (on verse 1) explains that when Moses concluded his lengthy address to the nation, the people returned to their tents. Ramban writes that Moses took the initiative to return to the camp of Israel, “in their honor, as one who wishes to depart from his friend, and wishes to receive permission from him.” While he could have remained sheltered in his sanctuary, Moses went to the people to extend honor to them and offer words of encouragement to continue their journey even after his death.

Moses’ gesture and his willingness to extend himself to the people carries meaning even today. Recently, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed a similar willingness [when he said that](#) he was “prepared to go to Ramallah in order to resume Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.” During a meeting Tuesday with Women Wage Peace, an organization formed after the 2014 Gaza war that is composed of Jewish and Arab women calling for coexistence, the prime minister said he was “prepared to go to Ramallah or anywhere else right now to meet and hold direct negotiations without preconditions.” While Netanyahu’s offer was immediately rebuffed by Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, the prime minister reiterated Israel’s willingness to negotiate in good faith, in addition to the many steps that Israel has taken to build trust with the Palestinian people. It is worth noting that according to media reports, [Israel removed an army checkpoint](#) at the intersection where the young American tourists made their fateful wrong turn, just one in a long series of quiet steps that Israel has taken to improve the lives of Palestinian civilians. These steps carry risks to Israel, as last week’s episode demonstrates. Yet, they are a calculated risk aimed at building trust to create an atmosphere for peace.

When asked whether he was afraid of being labeled a “collaborator” Abu Hamdiyeh [told the Israeli news website NRG](#) that, “I did the right thing—we’re talking about a humanitarian act on behalf of people that came here by accident. Those who threw rocks and burned their car perpetrated an evil act. We need to live together; that everyone should have work, and everyone can live appropriately.” May we pray that his words are heard in Ramallah and that 5776 brings a return to direct, bilateral negotiations towards a two-state solution. ■

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