

OCTOBER 26, 2015

Parashat Vayera

Inclusion vs. Exclusion

When he saw them, he ran to meet them (Genesis 18:2)

וירא וירץ לקראתם (בראשית יח:ב)

Last month, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas continued to spread the lie that Israel is desecrating the [Haram al-Sharif or Temple Mount](#) and he has also verbally praised Muslim worshipers who harass Jewish visitors there. Contrarily, Israel promotes inclusion and maintains the rights of all people—Jews and Arabs—to visit its holiest sites. This contrast between inclusion and exclusion represents an important theme found in Parashat Vayera.

Our forefather Abraham serves as the classic biblical proponent of *hachnasat orchim*—welcoming guests. Despite the fact that he was recuperating from his recent circumcision, he nonetheless “sat in the tent door in the heat of the day” waiting for the opportunity to welcome guests into his home (Genesis 18:1). Rabbi Yaakov Medan, in his commentary on Bereishit (See Ki Karov Eilecha vol. 1 pp. 118-120), notes the stark contrast between the behavior of Abraham, who toiled to make his guests welcome, and the people of Sodom, who viewed visitors as intruders they could abuse and victimization (see chapter 19). Medan writes, “Despite the heat of the day and the revelation of God to him so that he would not be troubled by guests, Abraham chased after guests and toiled on their behalf in an extraordinary manner. This stands in complete contrast to the actions of the people of Sodom—who although they were healthy, and the guests arrived in the [cool of the] evening and not in the heat of the day—they did not welcome them into their homes, and even attempted to abuse them.” According to Medan, the people of Sodom felt a sense of ownership and power over anyone who crossed into their territory, and afforded themselves the legal and moral right to take advantage of visitors and guests. Contrarily, “Abraham, as a host, saw himself as obligated towards his guests. They are the people with rights, and he must stand and serve them.”

We find this contrast in present day Israel between the actions and attitudes of Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs towards Jerusalem’s holiest sites. From 1948 until 1967, Jordan denied Jews access to the Old City or the Western Wall. After the Six-Day War, Israel immediately abolished the restrictions on access to the city, allowing people from all faiths to worship at their holy places. Since then, Israel has maintained the status-quo on the Temple Mount, despite numerous acts of Arab violence and incitement. Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer [explained](#) that, “In the Middle East, where militant Islamists desecrate and destroy churches, synagogues, world heritage sites, as well as each other’s mosques, Israel is the only guarantor of Jerusalem’s holy places.” In contrast, Arabs have not only denied Jewish historical claims to ancient Jewish holy sites, but also continue a campaign to prevent Jews from visiting any site they consider to be holy in Islam. In a television address on September 16, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas [said](#), “The Al-Aqsa is ours ... and [Israeli Jews] have no right to defile it with their filthy feet.” He [declared](#) that, “We welcome every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem. This is pure blood, clean blood, blood on its way to Allah. With the help of Allah, every martyr will be in heaven and every wounded will get his reward.” Sheikh Raed Salah, the head of Israel’s Islamic Movement, [called on the government of Jordan](#) “to revoke articles in the 1994 peace treaty with Israel that allow Jews to visit Temple Mount...even if this brings about the annulment of the peace treaty.”

Just as Israel follows the model of Abraham, welcoming others and providing a sanctuary of safety and security for all people to worship in Israel according to their beliefs, Palestinians should reject Sodom’s model of using harassment, physical attacks and violence to create an atmosphere of hatred and exclusion. ■

Acting with Alacrity

And Abraham ran unto the herd (Genesis 18:7)

ואל הבקר רץ אברהם (בראשית יח:ז)

Throughout *Parashat Vayera*, we note Abraham's unique attribute of alacrity. When confronted by the three guests who passed by his tent, Abraham "ran to meet them," literally begging them to join him for a meal. He also "hurries" (verse 6) to the tent, "runs" (verse 7) to find cattle to slaughter, and implores Sarah to not only prepare food for their guests, but to do so quickly. Much later, when commanded to bring Isaac as an offering on Mount Moriah, we read that "Abraham rose early in the morning." (Genesis 22:3) Rather than procrastinate and delay, Abraham made the extra effort to carry out the divine commandment, as difficult as it was, with alacrity. The Talmud (Pesachim 4a) derives from this verse the classic rule that, *zerizin makdimin l'mitzvot*—"those who act with alacrity rise early to perform mitzvot." When confronted with the opportunity to perform a mitzvah, we must not procrastinate, but instead take action without delay.

Often, the need to act with alacrity arises specifically with regard to our efforts to protect and defend the Jewish state. While some initiatives can take months or even years, others require quick, immediate response. The recent attempt to use an international forum to delegitimize Israel serves an important example. Last week, six Arab states who sit on the Executive Board of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates—attempted to erase the Jewish connection to three major holy sites in Israel when they [submitted a draft proposal](#) declaring that "the Western Wall is a part of al-Aqsa Mosque, and is actually called 'al-Buraq Plaza,'" and which also asserted that the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel's Tomb, outside of Bethlehem, are part of the Palestinian state. When they learned of the troubling draft resolution, two members of Congress, [Democratic Representatives Nita Lowey \(NY\) and Ted Deutch \(FL\)](#) sent [a letter](#) to U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO Crystal Nix-Hines urging her to lead an effort to block such resolution. The very next day, [Irina Bokova, head of the United Nations cultural agency](#), called on UNESCO members "to take [make] decisions that do not further inflame tensions on the ground and that encourage respect for the sanctity of the Holy Sites." The quick action of our members of Congress prevented a cynical United Nations committee from voting to erase any Jewish connection to the Western Wall, one of the holiest Jewish sites in Israel visited by millions of Jews each year.

When Israel finds itself the victim of international criticism and attack, we—who appreciate the value and importance of making our voices heard—may put off that phone call, email or letter to our elected representative. Today, in the wake of the recent surge in Palestinian incitement and terror in Israel, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY) are circulating a bipartisan letter addressed to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The [letter](#) calls on President Abbas to take "concrete steps to avoid further violence" by publicly condemning the recent terror attacks, putting an end to dangerous incitement stemming from the Palestinian Authority, and continuing important security cooperation with Israel. Please [contact your member of Congress today and urge him/her to sign this letter](#). If we wait to take action, we may be failing to make the critical difference that will spur our elected official to take action. Abraham's efforts remind us that sometimes, the only time to do *mitzvot* is "right away." We must all recommit ourselves to the principle of *zerizin makdimin*—when Israel needs us, we'll come to her aid and make our voices heard immediately, without delay. ■

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