



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 2, 2015

Parashat Yitro

A Universal Revelation

And Jethro came (Exodus 18:5)

ויבא יתרו (שמות יח:ה)

“I also have a dream.” So began the final passage of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin’s [address](#) (you can see a clip from his talk [here](#)) to a packed house at the predominantly African-American Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn early last week. Echoing the famous address of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Rivlin said that, “I have a dream that once again God will knock on our door. I dream that Jerusalem, which is a microcosm for the world, will serve as a model for coexistence between different communities and religions. We, the Jews and Muslims, are the children of Abraham; We are all the children of God.”

This vision of global harmony was never supposed to take place at some undetermined point in the future. Instead, it was supposed to occur at the Revelation described in Parashat Yitro. Rabbi Yaakov Medan, in his new work *Ki Karov Eilecha* (vol. 2 p. 261) suggests that according to the Talmud, the experience of receiving the Torah on Sinai was not originally reserved for the Jewish people alone, but instead God intended to convey the Torah to the entire world. “R. Johanan says: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel who received it.” (Avoda Zara 2b) Rabbi Medan notes that while the nations of the world did not accept the Torah at that point, the presence of Jethro—a gentile—does represent their symbolic presence. “The arrival of Jethro at the Israelite camp on the eve of the Revelation proclaims the giving of the Torah to the nations of the world as well...Jethro was the gentile from the nations of the world who was ahead of his time, and expressed the idea of the end of days even at Sinai.”

Rabbi Medan connects this worldview to the words of Isaiah who said that, “And it shall come to pass in the end of days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say: ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3) During his address, President Rivlin donned a *yarlmukah*, and [recited this very verse from Isaiah](#) in Hebrew.

According to [Ha’aretz](#), Rivlin noted that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside King, on the bridge in Selma, and mentioned that Dr. King was assassinated just days before the Passover Seder, to mark the Jewish festival of freedom. “I asked myself, why? Why was it so important that King [planned] to attend a Seder?” Rivlin asked. “I think, it was because King knew that one cannot fight for his own freedom, without fighting for the freedoms of others.”

When introducing President Rivlin to the congregation, U.S. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) [noted that](#) “The African-American community and the Jewish community have a great history together, and as long as we continue to work together—stay together—I’m confident that our two communities will remain close and strong, and one day soon, our people will together cross over into the promised land of a better way of life.” Both Jethro and Moses would firmly agree. ■

Unified Against a Common Threat

And there Israel encamped (Exodus 19:2)

ויחן שם ישראל (שמות יט:ב)

Last Thursday, the Senate Banking Committee adopted, by a vote of 18-4, the [Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act of 2015](#) which will bolster the nuclear talks between the P5+1 countries and Iran by applying pressure on the Iranian regime to reach an agreement. The bipartisan measure, sponsored by Senators Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ), puts in place the threat of additional sanctions that would go into effect if, and only if, the current round of negotiations fails to reach a final agreement. In a [recent letter](#) to President Obama, several Democratic senators emphasized this fact noting that, “for more than two decades, the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government have worked together in a bipartisan way to implement sanctions legislation that successfully ratcheted up pressure on Iran’s nuclear program.” Unity has been the engine that has brought Iran to the negotiating table. Now, we must continue to work together to coerce Iran to reach a final agreement.

Without unity, the Children of Israel would never have received the Torah. Rashi (on verse 2), famously noting that the verb connoting the camping of the nation opposite Mount Sinai appears in the singular form (*viyachan*— “and he camped”, instead of *vayachanu*— “and they camped”), remarks that the people approached Mount Sinai and the Revelation, “like one person, with one heart.” Yalkut Shimoni (Yitro 273) emphasizes this point, noting that the people could not receive the Torah until they united together. “The Holy One sought to give the Torah to Israel the moment that they left Egypt, yet they argued with one-another. When they reached Sinai they formed a single unit. Said the Holy One: ‘The Torah is wholly [a book of] peace. To whom shall I give it? To a nation that loves peace.’”

Yet, another famous passage in the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) notes that the Jews’ acceptance of the Torah was only completed much later on in Persia, after the salvation from Haman’s plot to eradicate the Jewish people. Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (See Sichot Mussar 7, 5731) explains that only when they faced the grave threat of annihilation did they unify completely, “for only at that time were the thoughts of each individual focused on the nation as a whole.”

For decades, unity has served as the hallmark that has built the strong relationship between Israel and the United States. The two countries share so much in common, as they stand united in their common dedication to the values of democracy and freedom. Both countries protect the rights of individuals and minorities, uphold basic freedoms, and were built on the principles of justice and fairness. Moreover, unity within the halls of Congress has powered the pro-Israel movement. Support for Israel stands strong specifically because it comes from both sides of the aisle—both Democrat and Republican, and from elected officials across the fifty states. Today our elected officials often note that the ties between Israel and the United States have “never been stronger” for an additional reason: our two countries stand shoulder to shoulder in the global fight against the spread of radical forces which threaten liberty around the world. The rogue countries that threaten Israel also threaten the interests and citizen of the United States around the world. Radical terrorists groups have attacked innocent Israelis and Americans, whose ideals represent the greatest challenge to their fundamentalist ideology. Both countries recognize that by standing united together, they strengthen each-other, sharing tools, technology, intelligence and tactics that make the world a safer place.

Speaking about the Iran legislation, “Republican Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee emphasized the need for bipartisan action on Iran,” Bloomberg News [reported](#) last week. As the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Corker took pains to avoid a partisan split over the Iran legislation. “One thing I want to do is make sure we stay unified as much as possible,” he told reporters in the U.S. Capitol. [Senator Robert Menendez](#) (D-NJ) reiterated the importance of preventing a nuclear Iran stating, “This legislation has been carefully calibrated to achieve our ultimate goal, which is to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapon capability,” speaking of his Nuclear Free Iran Act.

Iran was brought to the negotiating table through the power of American unity, as members of both parties worked together to achieve a goal critical to U.S. security interests. Only if we continue to remain unified, working together, can we achieve the final goal of ridding Iran of nuclear weapons. ■