



Sermon Tidbits

MAY 2, 2016

Parashat Achrei Mot

The Obligation to Speak Out (Yom Hashoah)

After the death of the two sons of Aaron (Leviticus 16:1)

אחרי מות שני בני אהרן (ויקרא טז:א)

Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds of Knoxville, TN served as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) in the U.S. Army and fought in Europe during World War II. Shortly after participating in the landing of the American forces in Europe, he was taken prisoner by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. Edmonds was held at Stalag IX A, a POW camp near Ziegenhain, Germany. In January 1945, the camp commander announced that all Jewish POWs in Stalag IX A were to report the following morning. Edmonds, who was the highest ranking soldier in the American section of the camp, ordered all of the men—Jews and non-Jews alike—to fall out the following morning. When the German officer, Major Siegmann, saw that all the camp's inmates were standing in front of their barracks, he turned to Edmonds and exclaimed, "They cannot all be Jews!" To which Edmonds replied, "We are all Jews here." Siegmann took out his pistol and put it to Edmonds' head, but the Master Sergeant did not waver, giving only his name, rank, and serial number as required by the Geneva Conventions. According to his son, Rev. Chris Edmonds, Master Sergeant Edmonds then said, "If you are going to shoot, you are going to have to shoot all of us because we know who you are and you'll be tried for war crimes when we win this war." The officer turned around and left the scene. This year, Yad Vashem [recognized Master Sergeant Edmonds](#), who passed away in 1985, as a Righteous Among the Nations, an honorific title to describe non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis. He became only the fifth American and the first U.S. service member so honored. He is also the only one honored for saving American Jews.

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 20) relates that when Job heard about the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, he responded in shock and horror, saying, "At this also my heart trembles..." (Job 37:1) Why did Job react so strongly to this tragedy? The author Joseph Paznovsky in his work *Pardes Yosef* connects this Midrash to another famous legend about Job. The Sages teach us that Pharaoh had three advisors at the time that the terrible plot to murder Jewish babies was devised: Balaam, who devised the plan, Job and Jethro. While Jethro fled rather than play any role in fratricide, Job remained silent. According to one opinion, Nadab and Abihu died because Nadab complained to Abihu about Moses' and Aaron's leadership, and yearned for the day when they would lead the nation in their stead. According to Pardes Yosef, when Job heard about their deaths, he wondered why Abihu was also punished if only Nadab spoke. He therefore derived from the tragedy the lesson that, "If a person learns about the evil intentions of his fellow man and remains silent and does not protest, he becomes a partner for that evil, and suffers punishment as well..." Seeing Abihu punished for failing to protest against his brother's wrongdoing, Job trembled, as he recognized that he too would one day suffer for his unwillingness to protest against the mass murder of Jewish babies in Egypt.

Few have the great courage of a Roddie Edmonds to stand up and protest in the face of great personal danger. Yet, all of us have the ability and the obligation to speak out when we witness evil in the world. Speaking at a ceremony honoring Edmonds at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. earlier this year, [President Obama noted the obligation to speak out against the evil of anti-Semitism](#) and America's commitment to protect Israel and the homeland of the Jewish people. "Like the Righteous, we must do everything we can. All of us have a responsibility...As President, I've made sure that the United States is leading the global fight against anti-Semitism...It's why, when voices around the world veer from criticism of a particular Israeli policy to an unjust denial of Israel's right to exist, when Israel faces terrorism, we stand up forcefully and proudly in defense of our ally, in defense of our friend, in defense of the

Jewish State of Israel. America's commitment to Israel's security remains, now and forever, unshakeable. And I've said this before—it would be a fundamental moral failing if America broke that bond.”

This past Thursday, Jews around the world paused to remember the six million Jewish lives that perished at the hands of the Nazis. But memory alone is not enough. We must see ourselves as obligated to speak out and protest when we hear others express and support evil in the world. This applies of course, to all forms of hatred and intolerance, but as Jews living in the United States, we have a special role of protecting the state of Israel from words and acts that hide hatred for Jews behind anti-Israel rhetoric and actions.

President Obama noted that, “All of us have a responsibility to speak out, and to teach what's right to our children, and to examine our own hearts. That's the lesson of the Righteous we honor today—the lesson of the Holocaust itself: Where are you? Who are you?” Job, most certainly, would have heartily agreed. ■

The Power of Passion to Affect Others

He shall live by them... (Leviticus 18:5)

וְחַי בָּהֶם (וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה)

Democratic Senators Chris Coons and Republican Senator Lindsay Graham recently sent [a letter to President Obama](#) urging him to increase foreign aid to Israel and sign an agreement on a new Memorandum of Understanding aimed at assisting the Jewish state in meeting its growing security needs into the future. They wrote that, “We stand ready to support a substantially enhanced new long-term agreement to help provide Israel the resources it requires to defend itself and preserve its qualitative military edge.” While the letter itself testifies to strong support for military assistance to Israel in the halls of Congress, the most impressive aspect of the letter was the broad-based, bipartisan backing that the letter enjoyed, as [eighty-three Senators](#)—51 Republicans and 32 Democrats—co-signed the letter.

Though members of the U.S. Senate certainly support the Jewish state, this letter—and especially the tremendous support that it received—could never have happened without the incredible efforts of thousands of lobbyist who not only blanketed the Capitol at this year's AIPAC Policy Conference, but also emailed and called their Senators over the past few weeks urging them to co-sign the letter. In essence, it wouldn't have happened without our passion.

Passion represents a critical aspect of religious life. While there's no specific mitzvah requiring that we act with passion and excitement in Jewish life, passion is the backbone and the core that motivates and guides us. The Torah alludes to this idea in our Sedra when we are instructed that: “You shall therefore keep My statutes, and My ordinances, which if a person does, *he shall live by them...*” (Leviticus 18:5) Commentators throughout the ages have debated the meaning of this unusual phrase. What is intended by conveying that one should “live” by the mitzvot? The Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk suggested that this verse encourages us to live religious lives full of passion. “We must make an effort that the mitzvot that we fulfill are full of life, and should be performed with excitement, that shines the fire of holiness on those around us, and not, heaven forbid, that we should perform them as ‘dead’ mitzvot, performed by rote...” (see *Parparaot L'Torah* vol. 3 p. 121) When we speak to others about the good that Israel does around the world; when we advocate and project the critical role Israel plays in securing peace in the Middle East; when we proudly advocate for Israel as the only democratic, free country in the Middle East—our passion speaks volumes, and affects others in a profound manner.

That passion can have a critical affect—as we witnessed in the letter sent to the President last week. Immediately after the Senators sent the President their letter, the [Times of Israel reported that](#), “A White House official indicated...that the Obama administration was ready to offer Israel the largest military aid package offered to any country over the course of U.S. history.” Passion is contagious. When we harness our passion for the power of a great mitzvah, we can really affects others and bring great change to the world around us. ■

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