



Sermon Tidbits

OCTOBER 26, 2016

Parashat Bereishit

Guarding the Garden

To work it and to guard it (Genesis 2:15)

לעבדה ולשמרה (בראשית ב:טו)

Earlier this month, researchers from Tel Aviv University (TAU) published an article describing their discovery of a process that uses microalgae to produce hydrogen. According to the [Times of Israel](#), the research, which was conducted by the School of Plant Sciences and Food Security at TAU's Facility of Life Science and led by Dr. Iftach Yacoby, used highly sensitive technology and genetic engineering to enable the microscopic algae to produce hydrogen on a consistent basis. The discovery reveals that hydrogen, considered one of the cleanest fuels, could one day become a reliable way to supply the world's energy needs and its production from algae is more promising than had been thought. It is this type of achievement which will allow mankind to fulfill two seemingly contradictory tasks laid out in Parashat Bereishit.

According to the biblical text, when Adam was placed into the Garden of Eden he was given two seemingly opposing tasks. We read in the second chapter of Genesis (verse 15) that God, "took the man, and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it." Those two goals—to "work" the garden and "guard" it—can often be at odds with each other. Work—meaning building, planting, conquering (see Genesis 1:28)—all carry the potential to damage and destroy the delicate balance of the garden. On the other hand, "guarding" a garden would usually preclude working the garden, as the act of work carries the potential for damage and destruction. The Sages in the Midrash (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7) note this potential conflict in an allegorical story about man's first tour of the Garden of Eden. They write, "When the Holy One created Adam, He lifted him up and showed him all the trees of the Garden and said to him, 'See how pleasant and praiseworthy are My creations! All that I have created, I have created for you. Take special care that you not spoil nor destroy my world, for if you destroy it, there is no one to fix it after you.'" Thus, while man is enjoined to work and build the garden—and by extension the entire world—he is also instructed to do so with care; that his building does not at the same time permanently mar the beauty and wonder of the garden. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch in his commentary on the Torah (on verse 16) notes this duality as well. "The terms 'work' and 'guarding' include not only direct work and care of the ground, but also the whole moral behavior of Man in acting and refraining from acting in according with his duty. Nature itself finds its appointed purpose promoted, as well as the necessary condition for its continuance, as expressed by 'work and guarding.'"

Today, as the earth continues to warm at an alarming pace and as the global thirst for energy has driven mankind to ever greater efforts to procure and extract fossil fuels from the earth, the need to balance "working" the garden and building the world to suit our needs, with "guarding" the earth from potentially permanent damage, has never been greater. It is with this balance in mind that a new partnership between the United States and Israel carries critical potential for the future. Last month, during a joint hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, Assistant Secretary of Energy for International Affairs Jonathan Elkind [told members of Congress](#) that the United States Department of Energy (DOE) is preparing to establish a [U.S.-Israel joint energy research center](#). This new research center is part of a growing bilateral energy alliance, which includes a new Memorandum of Understanding between DOE and Israel, the robust U.S.-Israel Energy Dialogue, and the energy arm of the Binational Industrial Research and Developed (BIRD) Foundation that facilitates private sector collaboration between the two countries in the pursuit of new energy technologies. At the hearing Elkind explained that the center, "will build on the extensive engagement that already exists between our two countries through the U.S.-Israel Energy Dialogue, as well as programs such as the BIRD Energy program, the upcoming energy-water desalination challenge,

and others. We are confident that a potential new center would help benefit U.S.–Israel energy cooperation.” Not only will this partnership benefit both countries; it will also help the two partner nations to pool resources and knowledge as they collaborate to build energy resources that will allow mankind to continue to build the world, while simultaneously guarding and protecting our future. ■

Remorse or Insolence?

My punishment is greater than I can bear (Genesis 4:13)

גדול עוונני מנשוא (בראשית ד:יג)

Last week, an Iranian court sentenced Siamak Namazi, an Iranian-American businessman with dual citizenship who has been held in prison for more than a year, to ten years in prison for “collaborating with a foreign government,” the [New York Times reported](#). According to Iran’s Mizan news agency, Namazi was convicted of “espionage and collaboration with the American government.” It is now painfully clear that despite the nuclear agreement, Iran’s attitude towards the West has not changed in any meaningful way.

Following Cain’s murder of his brother, Abel, he is confronted by God about his terrible sin. Cain initially denies any knowledge of his brother’s whereabouts in what became the most famous and pathetic disavowal in history: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (verse 9) When he is ultimately confronted with the facts and informed of his great punishment, Cain relents and admits his guilt. Yet, the nature of Cain’s admission is the subject of a famous debate between Rashi and Ramban. According to Ramban (on verse 13), Cain’s comment—“My sin is too great to bear” —represents nothing short of a “confession,” an admission of guilt, and the recognition of the magnitude of his sin. Ramban writes that Cain here states that, “It is true—my sin is too great to forgive, and You God are righteous in Your judgment, despite the great punishment.” Rashi views Cain’s statement in precisely the opposite manner. Rather than seeing Cain’s response as a confession and admission of guilt, according to Rashi, Cain continues to deny his own personal responsibility in the entire affair. Rashi understands Cain’s comment to God as a question: “Is my punishment too great to bear? You accept the sins of those who dwell above and below, yet my sin You cannot bear?” Midrash (Tanchuma) calls Cain’s response a “repentance of deception.” While his words could be seen to represent contrition, in truth Cain refuses to take personal responsibility for the murder of his brother Abel.

Cain represents the archetype of the human reaction to sin—when confronted with our misdeeds, do we accept responsibility and hope for forgiveness, or do we rebuff any accusation of wrongdoing, double down and refuse to take ownership for our actions? The same question applies to the Islamic Republic. Following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), many hoped that Iran would curtail its hostile activity, reign in its support of terror, and begin a process of rapprochement with the international community. Unfortunately, since the signing of the agreement, Tehran has simultaneously escalated its terrorist activities, ballistic missile tests and human rights violations. Instead of admitting guilt for its past sins and taking responsibility for its harmful behavior, Iran has instead shrugged off accusations of wrongdoing, flouting the will of the international community.

Iran’s behavior only makes the United States’ [recent concessions to Iran](#) all the more curious. The Treasury Department recently issued new guidance that opened the door to business with Iran’s leading terrorist organization, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The new guidance states that it is “not necessarily sanctionable” for foreign persons to engage in transactions with an entity that is “minority owned, or that is controlled in whole or in part” by Iranian entities sanctioned for their support of terrorism, ballistic missile activity, or other nefarious activities. Under the new guidance, foreign companies could potentially conduct business—and face no sanctioning—with entities entirely controlled by the IRGC, Defense Industries Organization, or the Ministry of Defense for Armed Forces Logistics. Any long term success of the JCPOA depends on Iran understanding that [any violation will lead to swift, certain response](#). Undeserved concessions going beyond the JCPOA only reinforce Tehran’s propensity to violate its international obligations and ultimately undermine the JCPOA itself. ■

Sermon tidbits are intended for your use without attribution. Please feel free to use some or all of the material. Although it is not necessary, it is appreciated if copies of sermons or articles that use the ideas presented here are sent to synagogue@aipac.org.