



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 8, 2016

Parashat Devarim

Redemption through Justice – Shabbat Chazon

Zion shall be redeemed with justice (Isaiah 1:27)

ציון במשפט תפדה (ירמיהו א:כז)

Earlier this year, after years of appeals, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was [convicted of bribery](#). This crime is, of course, no cause for celebration. Yet, at the same time, we must also acknowledge that in its willingness to convict a former prime minister for a significant crime, Israel sent a strong message not only to its own citizens, but to the rest of the world. The Jewish state is a country of law and justice for all, no matter one's prestige. The morning he entered prison, Olmert released a video in which he declared his innocence, but also acknowledged that his sentence, "is an unusual, serious event that shows the strength of Israeli democracy."

The critical importance of justice and fairness is an underlying theme of Tisha B'av that is often overlooked. This Shabbat—"Shabbat Chazon"—is named for the opening phrase of this Shabbat's Haftarah which begins, *Chazon Yishayahu*—"The vision of Isaiah"—in which the prophet foretells in great detail the destruction of the First Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem. We often focus on the details of Jewish suffering, yet, Isaiah was commanded to convey the message of doom not to demoralize the people, but to spur them to repent and change. Isaiah describes a nation that was governed by corruption and graft. He decries, "Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards; they judge not the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come to them." (1:23) Still, Isaiah concludes his message on a positive note. God will one day return to Zion, "And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning; afterward you shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness." (1:26-27)

While Israel is far from perfect, we can say with pride that the modern state of Israel indeed represents a nation of justice. After Olmert's conviction in 2011, State Attorney Shai Nitzan [said that](#), "It is a sad day for the state of Israel when a former prime minister is found guilty of bribery charges...Nevertheless, the state can take pride in the fact that there is no one who is immune or above the law, regardless of their position in life." Moreover, Israel's strong actions against corruption have not gone unnoticed, especially in the Arab world. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), "the corruption case against Olmert received wide coverage in the mainstream Arab media, prompting an outcry about the need for transparency and accountability in the Arab world...A Saudi national named Abdel Karim urged his Arab brethren to stop criticizing Israel and learn something about its democracy. 'Before we curse Israel, we must learn from the democratic and judicial system in Israel, where no one is above the law.'"

In a recent [address](#) at the B'nai B'rith World Center Award for Journalism ceremony in Jerusalem, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer noted this important value, cherished both by Israeli and Americans. "My confidence in the future of the U.S.-Israel alliance also comes from my appreciation that our alliance is rooted in things that run much deeper. It is rooted in our most cherished values and in a shared sense of destiny. The idea that all are created equal in the image of God, that no one is above the law, that compassion for the most vulnerable is a sacred obligation—ideas which have been a moral compass for generations of Americans—were ideas first championed thousands of years ago by the prophets of the Jewish people and which today are fused into the national identity of the Jewish state." Isaiah was of course correct: "Zion shall be redeemed with justice..." ■

The Greatest Hatred – Tisha B'av

On Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (Talmud Gittin 56)

על קמצא ובר קמצא (תלמוד גיטין נ"ו)

Last month, Iranian police arrested 150 boys and girls in a garden in Islamshahr, near Tehran. According to the [Daily Mail](#), “Colonel Mohsen Khancherli, police commander for the west of Tehran Province, told the Tasnim news agency that officers were monitoring gardens following the arrival of summer.” For what offense did the police arrest the boys and girls? They were apprehended for attending a mixed-gender birthday party.

Tisha B'av—the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, represents the most challenging day on the Jewish calendar. In the Mishnah (Ta'anit 4:6) we read that, “On the ninth of Av, it was decreed that our fathers should not enter the Land, the Temple was destroyed the first and second time, Beitar was captured and the city [of Jerusalem] was plowed under...” The Sages in the Talmud remind us that calamitous, monumental events are often precipitated by a series of seemingly minor sins. A famous passage in the Talmud explains that Jerusalem was destroyed during the Second Temple era “over Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.” The Talmud (Gittin 56-57) relates that an important individual threw a lavish party, and instead of inviting his good friend Kamtza, his assistant invited Bar Kamtza, his mortal enemy. On the eve of the event, after noticing Bar Kamtza sitting at the party, the host publicly embarrassed his enemy, evicting him from the party, even after Bar Kamtza offered to foot the bill for the entire event. Enraged and embarrassed, Bar Kamtza convinced the Roman authorities that the Jews were rebelling, and ultimately brought the wrath of Rome to destroy the Temple and the Jewish settlement in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Benjamin Rapaport [connects](#) this story with another rabbinic teaching which states that the Second Temple was destroyed due to “baseless hatred.” He wonders why no one—including the Sages at that fateful event—came to the aid of Bar Kamtza. He writes, “The level of passivity that we find when it came to considering others’ welfare, whether emotionally, as in the case of Bar Kamtza’s shame, or physically in the case of his revenge, is astounding. Where was our humanity? When the Sages taught that the Holy Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, this is what they were referring to. Hatred is not just actively doing others harm. It is also about not caring. It is about seeing others in pain, others in danger, and not caring enough to get up and do something. If we think about, treating others like they do not exist is the greatest hatred.” When we fast on Tisha B'av, we must focus on the sin of passivity—of treating others as if they do not exist—and recognize and take action against suffering that we could otherwise prevent. One example of this trend is the ongoing human rights violations that continue in Iran.

Last month, the world marked the one-year anniversary of the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear weapons program. While many hoped that the agreement would also reflect a shift in the hardline policies of the Islamic regime, over the last year Iran’s treatment of its own citizens has significantly worsened. Earlier this year [the New York Times](#) reported that Ahmed Shaheed, who recently resigned as the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur for Human rights in Iran, said that at least 966 people were put to death in the Iran last year, roughly double the number executed in 2010. Mark Dubowitz, Executive Director of Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, [writes](#) that, “The Islamic Republic continues to commit serious human rights abuses, including limiting freedom of expression and the press; engaging in arbitrary detention and torture; and discriminating against women, ethnic, and religious minorities, and other vulnerable populations. The regime reigns over its citizens using repression and violence to rule through fear.”

Many Jews around the world will fast to mark the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. We must remember that indifference, apathy and a refusal to speak out also played an important role in the destruction that we mourn to this day. While our focus has turned away from Iran in recent months, Tisha B'av reminds us that we cannot look away from the suffering of others. We must speak out and protect those who cannot speak for themselves. ■

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.