



Sermon Tidbits

MAY 16, 2016

Parashat Emor

Sharing the Gift of Agriculture

Leave them for the poor and for the stranger (Lev. 23:22)

לעני ולגר תעזב אותם (ויקרא כג:כב)

Jews are a generous people; the Talmud (Yevamot 78) describes performing acts of kindness as, “One of the symbols of our nation.” In Parashat Emor, we find a mandate to give to others specifically through our agricultural blessings. “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corner of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor, and for the stranger.” (Leviticus 23:22) Every farmer is obligated to leave three types of gifts for the needy: *Peah*—the corner of the field, *Leket*—dropped harvest and *Shikechah*—forgotten sheaves—all to be collected by the poor. Notably, this is not simple charity. The poor must enter the field and collect the harvest gleanings, giving them a sense of dignity and ownership over their sustenance.

Today, Israel continues the tradition of giving through agriculture by sharing the knowledge necessary to succeed and prosper in agriculture. Through an exciting program, Israel is teaching thousands of poor farmers in Africa and Asia the farming skills necessary to feed their home countries. According to the website Israel21c.org, the Arava International Center for Agricultural Training (AICAT), located in the heart of the Arava desert, has hosted over 10,000 undergraduates from across Asia and Africa at its 10-month agriculture work-study program over the past 20-plus years. Students from Nepal, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, South Sudan, East Timor, Thailand and Indonesia come in August of every year. “They come at plantation time and grow with the plants,” Hanni Arnon, AICAT director said. “Here—where there are very harsh conditions, geographic isolation, extreme weather, arid soil and a shortage of water—they learn the importance of human capacity. If you want it, you can make a change. We teach that a difficulty is a challenge and you need to find a solution.” ■

A Swift Response

As he has maimed a man... (Leviticus 24:20)

כאשר יתן מום באדם (ויקרא כד:כ)

Two months ago, when [Iran test-fired two ballistic missiles](#), one of them with the phrase “Israel should be wiped off the Earth” written on it in Hebrew, the United States reacted by announcing limited sanctions targeting supporters of Iran’s ballistic missile program. Sadly, as the sanctions targeted companies already designated in previous sanctions, and which do not engage in international trade and do not have any overseas assets, these sanctions were unlikely to have any deterring effect on Iran’s missile program. Not surprisingly, the Islamic Republic continued development on its missile program undeterred. Iranian Brigadier General Ali recently said that two weeks ago Iran successfully tested a precision-guided missile with a range of 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles). Without a sufficient response, Iran will continue to flout the will of the international community and develop a dangerous ballistic missile program capable of launching a warhead against Israel or Eastern Europe. The time has come to implement sanctions sufficient to deter Iran from continuing on this dangerous, provocative path.

The legal practice of *lex talionis*, developed in early Babylonian law and present in both biblical and early Roman law, held that criminals should receive as punishment precisely those injuries and damages they had inflicted upon their victims. Many early societies applied this “eye-for-an-eye” principle literally. Rabbinic Judaism rejected the principle of eye-for-an-eye, and instead stressed monetary retribution rather than physical punishment. Even when we

find phrases in the Biblical text that seem to require measure-for-measure justice, the Sages reinterpreted those verses to require monetary compensation. For example, in this week's parsha, we read, "And if a man maims his neighbor; as he has done, so shall it be done to him. Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has maimed a man, so shall it be rendered unto him." (Leviticus 24:19-20) Rashi, (on verse 20) quoting the Sages in the Talmud writes that, "Our Sages have interpreted that this is not the actual infliction of the wound, but instead a monetary payment." The imposition of both monetary and reciprocal punishments served to accomplish important goals: to remove dangerous elements from society (See Deut. 19:19: "...and you shall eliminate the evil from your midst.") as well as to deter potential criminals from violating the law ("And those that remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil in your midst." Deut. 19:20) These two goals—removing dangerous elements and deterring future malign behavior—are especially relevant as the United States responds to continued Iranian provocations.

Iran has repeatedly flouted its obligations under United Nations Security Council Resolutions which call upon Iran, "...not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology, until the date eight years after the [JCPOA \[Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action\]](#) Adoption Day." Limited, weak sanctions will only encourage the Islamic Republic to accelerate its destabilizing activities.

Jewish law imposed financial punishment in order to deter bad actors from repeating dangerous, criminal behavior. We must treat Iran in a similar manner, and impose sanctions that will deter it from continuing to develop its ballistic missile program. Failure to respond compellingly only empowers the regime to violate its commitments and continue development of nuclear-capable missiles. ■

Mutual Respect – A Lag B'omer Message

Because they did not treat each other with respect (Yevamot 62b) (שלא נהגו כבוד זה בזה (יבמות ט"ב))

This Thursday, Jews around the world mark Lag B'omer—the 33rd day in the counting of the Omer (from the second day of Passover through Shavout.) What is Lag B'omer? Since Talmudic times, Jews have considered the Omer period a time of minor mourning, marking the shocking deaths of twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud (Yevamot 62b) teaches that, "Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of disciples, from Gabbatha to Antipatris and all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect...A Tanna taught: All of them died between Passover and Shavuot." 12th century sage Rabbi Zerachia Halevi records an accepted, ancient tradition that the terrible deaths ceased fifteen days before Shavuot, on Lag B'omer. For this reason, Lag B'omer is considered a day of joy and celebration—and of relief from a terrible plague that ravaged the Jewish nation.

This year, Lag B'omer carries added meaning both in Israel and in the United States. Over many months, Israelis have suffered a long series of stabbing and ramming attacks, spurred by constant Palestinian incitement encouraging young people to attack innocent Israelis. While the attacks have not subsided completely—a masked Palestinian [stabbed two elderly women in Jerusalem last week](#)—the pace of attacks has significantly diminished. Israelis will celebrate Lag B'omer this year in the hopes that it too marks the end of attacks and deaths in the Jewish state.

Here in America, Lag B'omer reminds us of the danger of disrespect. The Talmud specifically notes that Rabbi Akiva's students died, "Because they did not treat each other with respect." This is especially surprising in light of the fact that Rabbi Akiva himself stressed the importance of loving one's fellow man, calling it a "Great principle of the Torah." In today's heated political climate, and especially as supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, we must use every opportunity to stress the importance of mutual respect and bipartisanship. Lag B'omer reminds us of the calamity which can ensue in a poisonous atmosphere of distrust and discord. While we can certainly disagree with one-another, we must avoid the path of Rabbi Akiva's students and disagree with honor, dignity and respect. ■

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