



# Sermon Tidbits

JULY 4, 2016

## Parashat Korach

### False Charges

Will you put out the eyes of these men (Numbers 16:14)

העיני האנשים ההם תנקר (במדבר טז:יד)

During an address to the Parliament of the European Union that recalled some of the historically worst anti-Semitic tropes, late last month Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, accused rabbis in Israel of calling on their government to poison the water used by Palestinians. According to the [New York Times](#) Abbas said, “Just a week ago, a week, a group of rabbis in Israel announced, in a clear announcement, demanding their government, to poison, to poison, the water of the Palestinians. Is this not incitement? Is this not clear incitement, to the mass murder of the Palestinian people?” To his credit, a day after his speech, Abbas [retracted the troubling charge of well-poisoning](#) saying in a statement released to the press, “After it has become evident that the alleged statements by a rabbi on poisoning Palestinian wells, which were reported by various media outlets, are baseless, President Mahmoud Abbas has affirmed that he didn’t intend to do harm to Judaism or to offend Jewish people around the world.” But, by then, the damage had been done.

Lies, especially in the context of political speech are nothing new. Politicians have been making false accusations in order to gain political points for millennia. Korach and especially his henchmen Dathan and Abiram attempted to use the very same tactic.

While Korach’s dispute with Moses engaged ostensibly in the question of leadership, in truth Korach and his men used falsehood in their claims against him. Rabbi Yehuda Tropper notes that when Dathan and Abiram complain and level charges against Moses (verses 13-14), they receive no response. Why does Moses refuse to respond to their challenges and arguments? Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, in his commentary *Ha’akeidah* explains, “In the words of Korach and his band there was no truth at all, and complete falsehood is the ultimate evil and a detraction that cannot ultimately be sustained...” Based on this idea, Rabbi Tropper explains that Moses refuses to dignify Korach and his henchmen with a response precisely because their complaints were riddled with falsehoods. He writes, “One [type of] extreme case is when there is a complaint devoid of any basis, whose entire purpose is combativeness for its own sake; [it is] an attempt to arouse a dispute without an honest claim. This was the claim of Dathan and Abiram against Moses when they said ‘will you put out the eyes of these men?’ a claim that the nation also realized was without merit. This type of claim does not demand a response...”

Last week the [Jerusalem Post](#) reported that in its recently released report on the Middle East diplomatic process, the Quartet (U.S., E.U., Russia and the U.N.) specifically referenced Palestinian incitement as one of the key obstacles to peace. The report states, “Continuing violence, terrorist attacks against civilians, and incitement to violence are greatly exacerbating mistrust and are fundamentally incompatible with a peaceful resolution.” If Mr. Abbas wishes to achieve a just and lasting peace, and state, for his people, he and the Palestinian leadership must halt their harmful rhetoric and finally return to direct negotiations with Israel. ■

## A Tangible Sign

To be a memorial to the children of Israel (Numbers 17:5)

זכרון לבני ישראל (במדבר יז:ה)

Several years ago, the government of Australia mandated what it called “plain packaging” on all cigarettes sold throughout the country. Anyone who has seen cigarettes from Australia knows that the boxes are anything but plain. Instead, the [New York Times reported](#) that, “The opaque couche-colored boxes have vivid pictures of rotted teeth, tongues with tumors and images of dangerously tiny newborns, along with warnings about smoking’s dangers printed in type larger than the brand names.” Research indicates that the boxes have had a dramatic effect. “Australia has seen the biggest decline in smoking prevalence that they’ve ever recorded after plain packing [was introduced],” David Hammond, an associate professor of public health and health systems at the University of Waterloo, said to [CBC](#). This shouldn’t really surprise anyone. While smokers know the dangers of smoking, actually seeing the terrible effects on the box is far more effective. A visual reminder can serve as a powerful deterrent.

The two hundred fifty men who joined Korach’s rebellion perished when a divine fire consumed not only the inappropriate incense they offered, but the men offering that incense with it. After their deaths, Moses is commanded to instruct Aaron’s son Elazar to take the copper incense pans used in the offering and “let them be made beaten into plates for a covering of the altar...that they may be a sign unto the children of Israel.” (17:3) Elazar followed Moses’ instructions and the firepans were beaten into a copper cover for the altar, “to be a memorial to the children of Israel, to the end that no common man that is not of the seed of Aaron, draw near to burn incense before the Adonai.” (verse 5) Ohr Hachayim wonders: If the copper covering was simply to serve as a reminder to prevent future generations from making the same tragic error of offering forbidden incense, why not just prohibit the behavior? Ohr Hachayim explains that a warning and prohibition would not have been sufficient to prevent future generations from violating a prohibited behavior. “Without a [symbol of] reminder, I am worried that for some person the warning will not suffice, and he will perish like Korach and his group. This [physical] reminder will suffice that he will not become like Korach.” Often a verbal warning fails to offer sufficient deterrent to prevent individuals from engaging in dangerous, even deadly behavior. In those cases, a tangible, visible reminder can be an important tool to prevent impulsive people from making foolish, dangerous choices.

Late last month, U.S. and Israeli leaders met in Fort Worth, Texas to celebrate the rollout of the first Israeli F-35 aircraft. Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who attended the rollout, said that, “Israel is proud to be the first country in the area to receive and operate it. The F-35 is the best aircraft in the world and the choice of all our military leadership at its highest level. It is clear and obvious to us and to the entire region that the new F-35, the Adir, will create real deterrence and enhance our capabilities for a long time.” While this incredible jet will dramatically enhance the Israeli Air Force’s tactical capabilities, its addition to Israel’s defensive capabilities will serve an additional role as well, as a reminder of America’s dedication to Israel’s qualitative military edge in the region.

Andrew J. Shapiro, the then Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs [explained](#) in 2011 that America’s military support to Israel serves the United States’ interest because, “If Israel were weaker, its enemies would be bolder. This would make broader conflict more likely, which would be catastrophic to American interests in the region. It is the very strength of Israel’s military which deters potential aggressors and helps foster peace and stability. Ensuring Israel’s military strength and its superiority in the region, is therefore critical to regional stability and as a result is fundamentally a core interest of the United States.” The F-35 isn’t just a great aircraft. It’s also an important deterrent. Israel’s adversaries know that Israel is the only country in the Middle East that currently has the ability to purchase this incredible, innovative aircraft. Thus, it serves as a constant, tangible and visible reminder to Israel’s adversaries that America has Israel’s back, and always will. By selling the F-35 to Israel, the United States made the Middle East tangibly safer and more secure. ■

---

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](mailto:synagogue@aipac.org).