

DECEMBER 26, 2016

## Parashat Miketz

### Preparing for the Future

And he gathered up all the food (Genesis 41:48)

ויצבר את כל אוכל (בראשית מא:מח)

When we read a Biblical story we often forget that we already know how the story ends. Choices that biblical figures make in the moment which seem obvious with the hindsight of history could not have been easy at the time. Imagine the following scenario: A head of state, after a series of disturbing dreams, seeks an advisor who can interpret the dreams to his satisfaction. When every single member of his government fails to offer a compelling interpretation, he discovers a Hebrew slave rotting in jail, who has the reputation of being a dream savant. The slave interprets the dreams to the king's liking, explaining that the dream means seven years of fantastic plenty followed by seven years of terrible famine, and he also convinces the ruler to appoint him as head of the huge government bureaucracy charged with the monumental task of planning for and addressing the coming famine. Were we Egyptian farmers living under Pharaoh during the seven years of plenty, would we have wholeheartedly supported Joseph's plan? Or would we have wondered whether the Pharaoh had truly lost his mind and was taxing the nation's greatest economic boom to fund an unnecessary and wasteful government boondoggle?

The Midrash tells us that the people of Egypt were not as supportive of Joseph as we might have imagined. After the Pharaoh appointed Joseph as second-in-command over the entire Egyptian empire, Joseph immediately imposed a drastic levy in order to store the bounty of the seven years of plenty to save the region during the years of famine. "He gathered up all the food of the seven years which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities...Joseph laid up corn as the sand of the sea, very much, until they left off numbering; for it was without number." (41:48-49) When Joseph toured around the country, according to the Midrash he did not always receive the warmest reception. Commenting on the verse which tells us that Joseph, "went throughout all the land of Egypt," the Midrash (*Midrash Or Ha'afelah*) explains that when he travelled throughout Egypt in order to build storehouses, the Egyptians would mock him and say "now the vermin will eat through his storehouses." Only years later, when the famine began in its full, terrible force, did the people grudgingly acknowledge Joseph had been right all along: "The seven years of famine began to come, according as Joseph had said..." (41:54)

Joseph envisioned a dangerous future and cautioned Pharaoh to take critical steps so that his country would be prepared should his bleak prediction come to fruition. Last month, members of Congress took a similar action, Congress passed the bipartisan [Iran Sanctions Extension Act](#) with overwhelming majorities in Congress and a unanimous vote in the Senate. The legislation extends the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) for an additional 10 years. [Originally passed in 1996 and set to expire](#) at the end of December, ISA targets investments in Iran's energy sector, the leading segment of the Iranian economy. Should it be discovered that Iran has violated the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the United States would be able to reinstate the biting economic sanctions without the need for additional legislation. "The Iran Sanctions Act is a crucial part of ensuring Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal. The sanctions authorized in this law show Iran's leaders exactly what they will face if they don't live up to their end of the bargain," [said](#) House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY). House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) [said](#) that "Iran's support for terrorism, and its push to develop a missile capable of striking the United States, is a direct threat to our national security. This law ensures the U.S. retains its ability to hold the regime accountable." Just as Joseph laid critical groundwork for his country's future, members of Congress have taken action to ensure that the U.S. is prepared should Iran violate the nuclear deal. ■

## A Great Miracle? Thoughts for Hanukah

For the miracles and wonders (Hanukah prayer)

על הנסים ועל הנפלאות (תפילה של חנוכה)

In his [remarks before the General Assembly of the United Nations](#) earlier this year, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outlined a remarkable list of Israeli achievements. He told the assembled diplomats and world leaders that, “Many [nations] seek to benefit from Israel’s ingenuity in agriculture, in health, in water, in cyber and in the fusion of big data, connectivity and artificial intelligence...Israel is a global water power. So if you have a thirsty world, and we do, there’s no better ally than Israel...How about cybersecurity?...Israel accounts for one-tenth of one percent of the world’s population, yet last year we attracted some 20% of the global private investment in cybersecurity...In cyber, Israel is punching a whopping 200 times above its weight. So Israel is also a global cyber power. If hackers are targeting your banks, your planes, your power grids and just about everything else, Israel can offer indispensable help.” Israel is nothing less than a modern miracle: from a poverty-stricken nation that emerged from the ravages of the Holocaust, Israel today has grown into a global player. And isn’t miracles what the holiday of Hanukah is all about?

The holiday of Hanukah comprise two seemingly contradictory themes. On one hand, Hanukah celebrates a great military victory of the Maccabees over the much stronger Greek-Syrian armies that had conquered the Holy Land. The “*Al Hanisim*” prayer added to both the daily *Amidah* as well as *Birkat Hamazon* focuses almost exclusively on the military victory. In the prayer we thank God that, “You delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous...” While we mention the Menorah in the Temple, there is no mention made of the miracle of the light that remained for eight nights. On the other hand, the Sages in the Talmud (*Shabbat 21b*) seem to ignore the story of the military victory, instead focusing on the story of the miraculous cruise of oil. “...When the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day’s lighting only; yet a miracle happened and they lit [the lamp] for eight days...”

What then is Hanukah? Is it the celebration of Jewish strength and the right of Jews to defend? Or, does it celebrate the miraculous nature of the Jewish nation and the primacy of our faith? The answer, of course is that both are true. The fact that the Hasmoneans vanquished a much larger adversary does not minimize the miraculous nature of that victory, and the great light of faith that sustained the people throughout the terrible war with the Greeks does not in any way mitigate the fact that in the end, Judah and the Maccabees had to fight to secure their great victory. The greatness of Hanukah rests in the melding of these two contradictory themes that define the Jewish people: our faith in the guiding divine light for guidance and support and the simultaneous recognition that “*ein somchin al hanes*” (see Ramban’s commentary on Numbers 1:45)—we do not rely on miracles, but instead take action on our own behalf.

In his [remarks at the recent White House Hanukah party](#) President Obama highlighted the powerful synergy of these two themes of Hanukkah, noting that “That’s the story of the Maccabees’ [an] unlikely military victory...How a little bit can go a long way, like the small measure of oil that outlasted every expectation. It reminds us that even when our resources seem limited, our faith can help us make the most of what little we have. The small state of Israel and the relatively small Jewish population of this country have punched far above their weight in their contributions to the world.” Let us also not forget the miraculous growth of the pro-Israel community in the United States over the last fifty years. Started from a small group with a great idea, today’s pro-Israel community spans the political spectrum, boasting strong supporters not just from the Jewish community, but from across the fifty states and among a diverse population of communities. At AIPAC’s yearly Policy Conference we see our share of Jews, of course. But we also see a growing number of college students, African Americans, Hispanics and Christian groups who share our support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. Seen one way, this incredible broad-based bipartisan support is nothing less than a miracle, but it is also the result of decades of vision and hard work. So, as we light the candles this week, let us resolve to strengthen not only our faith, but our determination that we never allow ourselves to rely on miracles, and commit ourselves to continue the work that has brought us the great miracle of Israel we enjoy today. ■