



Sermon Tidbits

SEPTEMBER 26, 2016

Parashat Nitzavim

Shared Responsibility

You are standing this day all of you (Deuteronomy 29:9)

אתם נצבים היום כלכם (דברים כט:ט)

Moses begins the final chapter of his charge to the Israelite nation by entering the people into a new covenant with God. When introducing this new covenant to the nation, Moses lists, in great detail, who the covenant includes: “You are all standing this day, all of you before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders and your officers... your little ones, your wives and the stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water” (29:10) If Moses wants to include everyone, why does he also delineate the various positions, from the leader and elder to the water carrier?

Rabbi Chaim ben Attar in his commentary *Ohr Hachaim* (on verse 10) explains that Moses wishes to convey that the notion of shared responsibility for the well-being of the entire nation rests on each and every individual, each according to his or her position in the nation. He writes, “The words ‘all of you’ mean that the yoke of responsibility in this matter rests upon all of them—every one of them according to his position... Any person who can protest about a matter affecting the people of his city is held responsible for the well-being of his city...” Ohr Hachaim explains that Moses refers to so many different types of people because each person carries a different level of responsibility corresponding to his or her position in life. There is no position too large or small in the Israelite nation that does not have the obligation to take action on behalf of the community. Whether we are an “elder” or a “drawer of water,” each of us has the obligation and responsibility to make our voices heard to make a difference.

Members of Congress take their responsibility very seriously, especially with regard to the safety and security of Israel. Last week, as world leaders gathered in New York for the opening of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 88 Senators from across the political spectrum signed a [letter](#) to President Obama, urging him to uphold for the duration of his term the U.S. policy of opposing “one-sided” United Nations resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and vetoing them where necessary, the [Times of Israel](#) reported. In the letter, which was initiated by Michael Rounds, a Republican from South Dakota, and New York Senator Kristen Gillibrand, a Democrat, the Senators urged the President to insure that the US must remain “an indispensable trusted mediator” between Israelis and Palestinians which continued to urge the Palestinians to return to negotiations rather than rely on one-sided resolutions in the United Nations and other international venues. These letters carry great importance, especially when signed by such a large bipartisan majority of members of the U.S. Senate, and especially in light of a [similar bipartisan letter](#) signed by 394 members of the House of Representatives this past April.

Our leaders have spoken. But the obligation to speak does not rely solely on our members of Congress. Have we followed their lead and written a similar letter? Those letters really do matter, and they do have an effect. Some of us may be able to change the mind of a politician, while others might be able to change the mind of a colleague or co-worker. Both are critical for the continued strong American support for Israel. Moses taught the Children of Israel that every voice matters and every person has the power to make a difference. He not only believed in the power each of us has to affect change; he held each of us responsible to use that power to affect the world around us. It is up to us to do our part, to accept the burden of shared responsibility for the wellbeing and security of Israel. ■

Consistency

This matter is exceedingly close to you (Deuteronomy 30:14)

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד (דברים ל:יד)

Following this month's historic announcement of the new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the United States and Israel, some went so far as to suggest that the pro-Israel community could now take a break. As a condition for the signing of the MOU, Israel agreed not to lobby Congress for additional Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds and to return any received in excess of the current MOU amount (\$3.1 billion per year) over the next two years. In addition, over the course of the next 10-year MOU (FY 2019 to 2028), Israel agreed not to lobby for any additional FMF or missile defense funds because both are funded within that MOU. It seemed to some that with American military support both secured and unchangeable, the Jewish community could turn its attention away from support for Israel to other important topics. The reality is that nothing could be further from the truth. The pro-Israel community has enjoyed such stunning success only due to our persistent efforts over a long period of time. And it is that consistency that will ensure that America stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel long into the future.

Moses would have agreed. In his final message to the people, Moses seems, at first glance, to convey the notion that keeping the covenant is “easy.” He tells the people, “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... But the word is very close to your, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.” (30:11-14) Commentators struggle with Moses' seemingly breezy attitude towards observance and faith. Experience teaches us that living a life of spirituality represents one of the most difficult challenges that we face in life. How then can Moses suggest that it's easy? In his commentary on the Torah (on verse 11), Rabbeinu Meyuchas explains that Moses never suggests that faith is easy. Rather, he says that it is close—which means something else entirely. Meyuchas explains, “[The phrase] ‘It is close to you’ refers to those who are close and engaged in this matter always—in them this idea is fulfilled. [The phrase] ‘It is in your mouth and heart to do it’ [means that] if this matter is always in your mouth and heart—[then he will be able] ‘to do it.’ We derive from this that one who engages in the Torah is the person who fulfills it...” In other words, the key to a life of spirituality is consistency. People who engage in religious life on a consistent basis find themselves closer, more engaged and more motivated. On the other hand, those who connect to godliness sporadically find themselves feeling distant and disconnected.

The same rule applies to so many areas in life. We get results in those areas that we practice with consistency—when the words are “in our mouths.” This is true not only in religious life, but in our professional lives, and even in our outside interests. And, it most certainly applies to the work we do on behalf of the Jewish state. While the MOU represents a tremendous achievement, the strong Congressional support that laid the foundation for the MOU was the result of years of effort and energy. That consistent message must continue to ensure that American support for Israel remains strong long into the future.

While the MOU sets the amount that the president should request, it is up to Congress to appropriate the funds each year. Thus, continuing to educate members of Congress on the value—to both the U.S. and Israel—of security assistance for the Jewish state is vital.

Moreover, defense funding is just one aspect of keeping Israel safe and secure. The Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) law, which provides the basic architecture of the sanctions regime imposed on Iran, expires in December 2016 unless Congress votes to extend it. Reauthorization of the ISA is crucial to ensure that sanctions waived under the Joint Comprehensive of Action (JCPOA) will be on the books should a “snap back” of sanctions be necessary as a result of Iran violations of the deal. We must work with Congress to encourage reauthorization of core U.S. sanctions on Iran—and to consider other legislation to push back against Iranian malign behavior in the region.

There is still much to do to protect and promote Israel's security. Our past success was achieved through consistency, and our future successes will be achieved in precisely the same manner: by staying the course, and working with diligence and persistence to explain the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship to our elected representatives. ■

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