



Sermon Tidbits

APRIL 25, 2016

Passover – Second Days

A Nation of Compassion

Then Moses sang... (Exodus 15:1)

אז ישיר משה (שמות טו:א)

Several weeks ago, a young Syrian mother brought her five-year-old daughter to the border with Israel for medical assistance after the girl sustained wounds during a firefight between rival militias in the now five-year-old civil war. After two weeks of treatment at Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, her doctors realized that they were dealing with something more serious—cancer. According to the [Times of Israel](#), a search for a bone marrow donor yielded a match with one of the girl's relatives, who lives in a nearby country designated as an enemy state. Under Israeli law, residents of enemy states are not allowed to enter the country without special permission. According to a Channel 10 Hebrew news report, the Haifa doctors turned to Israel's Secret Service (Shin Bet) to track down the relative and secure his entry into Israel. The mission was successful and the relative recently arrived in Haifa for the first scheduled treatment. While we are familiar with stories of Israelis assisting injured Syrians, this story seems unique for the extraordinary effort to save an innocent life. We find this ethic of compassion and caring—even for those who are against us—rooted deeply in the Jewish traditions surrounding the holiday of Passover.

Jews around the world add special prayers to the regular liturgy on Pesach. As we do on all festivals, we add the prayer of Hallel to Shacharit, offering words of prayer and thanks for the miracles and great blessings bestowed upon the Jewish people. Yet, there are two versions of Hallel recited throughout the year: "Full" Hallel, during which we recite Psalms chapters 113-118 in their entirety; and what is known as "Half" Hallel—in which we omit the first 11 verses of Psalms 115 and Psalms 116. "Half Hallel" isn't really fifty-percent less verses—but it does represent a more muted declaration of praise. On Shavuot and throughout Sukkot we recite the entire, "Full" Hallel each day. Yet, on Passover, after the first two days of Yom Tov during which "Full" Hallel is recited, we then switch gears and recite only "Half" Hallel for the remainder of the holiday. Why the shift? Why not offer the complete words of praise during the entire Pesach holiday? The fourteenth century Talmudist Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (known as Maharil) connects this ancient Jewish practice to a Midrash about the splitting of the Reed Sea. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 39b) teaches that when the heavenly angels wanted to sing praise to God at the Reed Sea, God refused. "In that hour the ministering angels wished to utter the song (of praise) before the Holy One, but God rebuked them, saying: 'My handiwork (the Egyptians) is drowning in the sea; would you recite song before me?'"

Compassion is embedded in our Jewish consciousness, following in Solomon's enjoinder, we "Do not rejoice at the downfall of our enemies." (Proverbs 20:17) Rather, we act with humanity, compassion and care for those in need, whether the needy is a flood victim in Leeds, earthquake victims in Nepal, or the victims of—and even the combatants in—Syria's civil war. This generosity of spirit has not gone unnoticed among the Syrian population. Abud Dandachi, a Syrian refugee now living in Turkey, created a [Facebook page](#) and a website called "Thank You Am Israel" to express his gratitude for Israel's efforts to save Syrian lives. Dandachi told the Israeli website [Ynet News](#) that, "Israelis are helping Syrian refugees in Jordan, in Greece, Serbia [and] North America. No one would have blamed the Jews and the Israelis if they had said it was not their problem. That is, by the way, what many Arabs and Arab countries did. The Gulf States, for example, shut their doors to Syrians – and these are the countries that call themselves friends of Syria...I grew up with statements like 'these people are your enemies. The Jews are evil.' And then I saw that the Jews are the most humane and generous people of this era. When I see that Hezbollah and the

Iranians are coming to kill me and I'm forced from my home by Syrians, and then I hear that Israelis and Jews are helping Syrians, my view of the world changes.”

The world changes when you help others not for political or public relations benefits, but because helping others is the right thing to do. We take great pride in supporting a Jewish state that promotes the care and compassion which emanate from Jewish values that have guided our people for millennia. When Israel combines timeless Jewish values with its power as a modern country, it truly serves as a beacon of light for the entire world. ■

A Ruthless Tormentor

I will pursue, I will overtake (Exodus 15:9)

ארדוף אשיג (שמות טו:ט)

When Israel released details about a newly discovered terror tunnel last week that reached under the border into Israel, Hamas' military wing responded with nonchalance that the tunnel was, “nothing more than a drop in the bucket of what the resistance has prepared to defend the people and liberate our holy sites, land and prisoners.” A senior Hamas official [told the Israeli news service Ynet](#) that while he does not currently expect the discovery of the tunnel to lead to a major military conflict between Hamas and Israel in the near future, “Another war is expected, but no one can say if it will happen in another year, ten years or twenty years.” Israel, of course, would prefer to maintain the calm indefinitely, and would happily provide the citizens of Gaza the goods, materials and energy necessary to live in peace. Yet, Hamas, which refuses to acknowledge Israel's legitimacy, and whose charter calls for Israel's destruction, won't budge an inch, determined never to compromise on its hatred for the Jewish state.

Pharaoh was the same way; he wouldn't give an inch. On the seventh day of Passover, Pharaoh's obstinacy and unwillingness to bend reached its apex, for a murderous and vengeful rage drove him to chase after and destroy the Israelites before they could escape. In *Az Yashir*, read on the seventh day of Passover, we remember the frightening threat that, “The enemy said: ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’” (Exodus 15:9) What possible gain could Pharaoh achieve by destroying the Israelites? Yet, he still refused to budge an inch, and his foolish zeal drove him to follow the Jews into the dry canyon of the Reed Sea, bringing about his own destruction.

Judaism long rejected the radicalism and extremism of Pharaoh, instead favoring a more balanced, measured approach. Rabbi Basil Herring, in his book “The Jewish Imagination,” (pp. 197-198) writes that “In speaking of moderation, it is remarkable to what extent Pesach is the festival par excellence of precisely that virtue. As Rabbi Ben Zion Firer has pointed out, the laws of Pesach highlight the middle: it occurs in Nissan, which is the middle of the Hebrew calendar year; within that month it occurs in the exact middle of the month, on the fifteenth day; the culmination of the struggle for freedom comes precisely *ba'hatzi ha'lailah*, the middle of the night...and ever since, the Jewish faith and way of life has preached and practiced a measured moderation in all things...”

This then, is precisely the predicament in which Israel finds itself. Like our ancestors so many years ago who only yearned for freedom from the oppressive Egyptian regime, modern Israel yearns for a moderate partner hungry for peace, safety and tranquility. Yet, it finds itself hounded by a violent and vicious tormentor. Time and time again Israel has demonstrated a willingness to reach a negotiated settlement and make painful sacrifices in order to achieve a true peace agreement. And while Israel has repeatedly declared this desire for peace and made extraordinary efforts to achieve that peace—including the total evacuation of the Gaza Strip—it nonetheless must still contend with a radical Hamas leadership bent on terrorism and murder.

As we read about the attempt to destroy the Israelites at the edge of the Reed Sea during the Exodus, we must also recommit ourselves to ensuring that the modern Jewish state has the means, resources and capability to defend and protect its citizens from harm, as they hope and pray that a willing partner for peace soon emerges. ■