

APRIL 4, 2016

Parashat Tazria - Hachodesh

Words that Hurt and Leper States

And the leper in whom the plague is... (Leviticus 13:45)

והצרוע אשר בו הנגע (ויקרא יג:מה)

Last year, Leila Zerrougui, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, was tasked with monitoring the way children are affected by armed conflict. She [recommended placing the Israeli military](#) on a list of organizations that are “regularly and systematically compromising the welfare of children.” The appendix included terror groups such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram, branches of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as well as countries such as the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo. Interestingly, Hamas was left off the list. While the effort [ultimately failed](#), the Israeli government condemned the effort as an attempt to put Israel on the same list as “leper organizations and countries.” Ironically, while the United Nations tried to use the power of its words to condemn and ostracize Israel, the Torah takes the opposite view, connecting hurtful speech with the leper afflicted with *tzara’at*.

The bulk of Parshat Tazria focuses on numerous forms of *tzara’at*—a physical affliction that manifested through various discolorations of the skin and other parts of the body. The Sages in the Midrash stress that this affliction represented not a physical ailment that required a doctor, but instead a spiritual malady that required the attention of the Kohen—the priest. They understood that a person who was afflicted with *tzara’at* committed the sin of speaking *lashon hara*—evil speech. Commenting on the commandment that the leper must “dwell alone; outside the camp shall his dwelling be...” (13:46) Rashi teaches: “Our Sages wondered: Why is [the leper] different from other [spiritually] unclean people that he must ‘dwell alone’ [while other people afflicted with impurities may remain in the camp]? Since he caused a separation through evil talk between husband and wife or between a man and his friend, [therefore] he also should be isolated.” The Sages understood that evil speech—that which demonizes and divides—has the power to do real damage. For this reason, Judaism places great emphasis on the dangers of *lashon hara*, the efforts we must make to combat negative speech, and the negative repercussions evil speech can have not only on individuals, but on entire communities.

Today, people around the world have learned to harness their hatred for Israel by utilizing their words to encourage both companies as well as entire countries to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel. Israel has long been targeted with economic warfare and the U.S. Congress has a [proud history of defending Israel from such attacks](#). While Congress previously focused on the Arab League Boycott of Israel, today’s challenge comes primarily from Europe, where some governments are initiating efforts to boycott and divest from Israel and sanction companies that operate there. This year, the United States government for the very first time officially went on record opposing the anti-Israel BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement, when President Obama signed in to law H.R. 644, the “Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015,” also known as the “Customs bill.” The bill also protects U.S. companies doing business in Israel from harmful anti-Israel trade and commercial practices. On Feb. 10, lawmakers in the House and Senate introduced the Combating BDS Act of 2016 (S. 2531 and H.R. 4514), a bipartisan piece of legislation aimed at increasing efforts to combat economic warfare against Israel at the state and local levels. Authored by Sens. Mark Kirk (R-IL) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) in the Senate and Reps. Juan Vargas (D-CA) and Bob Dold (R-IL) in the House, the bipartisan bills will protect state and local governments’ right to disassociate pensions and contracts from entities that boycott, divest from, or sanction Israel. Thankfully, state governments have been

doing just that. Last week, [Georgia became the sixth state](#) to pass anti-BDS legislation, and similar bills are under consideration in another dozen or so states.

Hypocritically, those targeting Israel for economic boycott hope to use *lashon hara* to turn Israel into a “leper state.” Just as Judaism taught us to combat *lashon hara* and the harm that it can cause in our own lives, we must also use the power of our voices to [speak out against harmful BDS efforts](#), and encourage our lawmakers to do the same. ■

Be Prepared – Parashat Hachodesh

This month shall be unto you (Exodus 12:2)

החודש הזה לכם (שמות יב:ב)

In his explanation of the scout (both boy and girl) motto, “Be prepared,” Robert Baden-Powell writes that, “The Scout Motto... ‘Be prepared’... means you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty. Be Prepared in Mind, by having disciplined yourself to be obedient to every order, and also by having thought out beforehand any accident or situation that might occur, so that you know the right thing to do at the right moment, and are willing to do it. Be Prepared in Body by making yourself strong and active and able to do the right thing at the right moment, and do it.” Scouts learn the importance of preparation to ensure that if a situation arises, one has both the mental and physical preparedness to get the job done.

The Sages considered this message—“Be Prepared”—to be one of the underlying motifs behind the reading of Parashat Hachodesh. We read in the Mishnah (Megillah 3:4) that, “On the fourth [Sabbath of Adar we read] ‘This month shall be unto you...’” In other words, on either the last Shabbat before the new month of Nisan, or on Rosh Chodesh Nisan, as it happens this year, we add the additional reading of Exodus 12:1-20. Why did the Sages designate this additional reading? One explanation is they wanted to give the people an additional warning so that they could prepare for the coming holiday of Passover. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov (The Book of Our Heritage vol. 2 pp. 118-119) writes, “The reading which reminded the people that Nisan was at hand, also reminded them of the approach of Pesach, so that they could make preparations for the pilgrimage...” In ancient times, the journey to celebrate Pesach in the Temple required a great deal preparation. Today, while we do not offer sacrifices in the Temple, Pesach—with the multiple Seders, the cleaning, the shopping and the cooking—still requires a great deal of preparation in order to properly enjoy the holiday with our loved ones. So today the Sages warned us: Be prepared! Pesach is coming!

The need to be prepared also underlies America’s support for the Jewish state. The United States has maintained a longstanding policy of ensuring that Israel enjoys a Qualitative Military Edge (QME) over its adversaries. By doing so, the United States ensures that its ally is prepared to confront any threat or combination of threats it might face, by itself without the need for outside assistance. This is also why the United States stockpiles weapons and other emergency equipment in secure locations across Israel under the “The War Reserves Stock Allies-Israel program.” Should the United States need munitions in the Middle East, stockpiles are already there, ready for use. At the same time, should Israel require emergency munitions, it could request access to the supplies from the American President.

“Be Prepared” must also serve as the motivation for Congress to Reauthorize the Iran Sanctions Act. The Iran Sanctions Act (ISA), a core element of U.S. sanctions on Iran, targets foreign entities supporting Iran’s energy sector and those aiding Tehran’s attempts to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction and advanced conventional weapons. The legislation will expire in December of 2016 unless Congress extends it. To implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the administration waived all energy-related sanctions, but has pledged that it will snap back these sanctions should Iran violate the JCPOA. In order for sanctions to “snap back” Congress must reauthorize ISA to ensure that the architecture of sanctions is in place should Iran violate the terms of the nuclear agreement. While we expect Iran to keep its commitments and not resume its nuclear military research, the United States must always be prepared for the possibility that Iran may cheat on the deal. If it does, Congress must already have sanctions in place which it can impose at any time. In other words, we must “Be Prepared.” ■