



Sermon Tidbits

DECEMBER 5, 2016

Parashat Vayitzei

Threatened From All Sides

That Jacob had fled... (Genesis 31:22)

כי ברח יעקב (בראשית לא:כב)

Early last week, four ISIS-affiliated jihadist fighters, riding in a vehicle with a machine gun mounted on its roof, assaulted an Israeli reconnaissance unit with gunfire and mortars on the Israeli-controlled side of the Golan Heights, the [New York Times reported](#). “The confrontation appeared to be the first of its kind between Israel and Islamic State-affiliated forces based in Syria.” According to the [Times of Israel](#), the four men were members of the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, formerly known as the Yarmouk Martyrs’ Brigade, a terrorist group in Syria that is connected with the Islamic State. “They have said they will come to Jerusalem,” Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, a spokesman for the Israeli military said of the Islamic State, whose various branches have issued such threats. “We have no intention of letting them come to Jerusalem. According to the [New York Times](#), “Israeli officials have long said it was only a matter of time before the Islamic State-affiliated forces along the Syrian frontier turned their attention to Israel.” While the episode concluded thankfully with no injuries to the Israeli soldiers, it only served to highlight the imminent threats that Israel contends with on a constant basis.

Our forefather Jacob, could certainly relate, as Parashat Vayitzei both begins and ends with Jacob in flight from imminent danger. The Parashah begins with Jacob fleeing from his brother Esau, who had vowed to murder his brother for the crime of “stealing” his blessing from their father. We read that Esau “Said in his heart, ‘Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.’” (Genesis 27:41) Yet, if Esau only expressed his hatred for Jacob in his heart, how then were “the words of Esau...told to Rebekah”? (27:42) How did she know what he was thinking? The Sages in the Midrash (*Avot D’Rabbi Natan* 45) explain that, “[Esau] revealed his intention to every inhabitant of the world...” Esau felt no compunction about sharing his intention of murdering his brother, which is precisely how Rebecca learned of his hatred and compelled Jacob to flee for his life. Our Parashah concludes with Jacob fleeing from Laban, his father-in-law, for the “crime” of running away without giving proper advance notice of his intentions. The Midrash (*Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 36) highlights the notion of Jacob in a constant state of flight, for Rabbi Eliezer states that Jacob fled on his way to Laban, “Jacob fled into the field of Aram” (Hosea 12:13) and he also fled from Laban, “And it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled.” Throughout the Parashah, Jacob could never escape the fact that danger lurked in very close proximity.

Today, the state of Israel finds itself in precisely the same predicament, surrounded by threatening adversaries. To its north, in addition to the new and growing threat from ISIS in Syria, Hezbollah is stronger today than ever before. Hezbollah is gaining combat experience in Syria, increasing the likelihood that the next war in Lebanon will likely be far worse than the last Lebanon war ten years ago. To Israel’s south, Hamas remains in control of Gaza and terrorists roam the Sinai Peninsula; and to the east, Iran has gained access to more than \$100 billion in frozen assets that will help fuel its support for terrorism and regional destabilization. These threats, combined with new challenges like cyber-attacks, tunneling and the threat of a nuclear Iran, require Israel to increase the strength and adaptability of its armed forces.

We work so hard to promote a strong U.S.-Israel relationship precisely because of these constant threats facing the Jewish state. Continued American military support for Israel, which guarantees Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge, gives Israel the means to defend itself, by itself. Our hard work led to the new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the United States and Israel signed earlier this year, which will provide \$38 billion in critical U.S. security assistance to Israel over the next 10 years. While today we read about Jacob in exile, constantly running from

threats, the strong support of the American people gives Israel both the strength and the peace of mind to know that it has the resources it needs to contend with the threats it faces in an increasingly uncertain region. ■

A Negotiated Settlement

And now come, let us make a covenant (Genesis 31:44)

ועתה לכה נכרתה ברית (בראשית לא:מד)

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives [adopted H. Con. Res. 165](#), a bipartisan resolution reaffirming support for direct Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations leading to a sustainable two-state solution. The resolution, introduced by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Ranking Member Eliot Engel (D-NY), reiterates U.S. opposition to United Nations (UN) Security Council efforts that would impose a solution to the conflict, and affirms the “long-standing policy of the United States Government that a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only come through direct, bilateral negotiations between the two parties.” Warning against “any widespread international recognition of a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood outside of the context of a peace agreement with Israel,” the resolution calls on the United States “to oppose and veto United Nations Security Council resolutions that seek to impose solutions to final status issues, or are one-sided and anti-Israel.” As we learn from the conclusion to our Parashah, the ideal resolution to conflict is one in which two parties achieve a mutually agreed resolution.

On the night of Passover, during the Seder, we begin the story of the Exodus in an unusual manner: *Arami oved avi*—“an Aramite tried to destroy my father.” According to the Sages, this refers to none other than Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, who chased after Jacob and his family who had fled in the middle of the night. Rabbi Ari Kahn, in *Echoes of Eden* (vol. 1) quotes the Gaon of Vilna, who notes the striking similarity between Jacob’s flight to freedom and the story of the Exodus. He explains that, “In terms of their structure, the two stories are strikingly similar. Both describe the escape, the almost-supernatural accrual of wealth, and the three day chase culminating in confrontation on the seventh day.” Yet, the two stories end in strikingly different manners: The Israelites’ secure freedom at the Reed Sea via the downfall and destruction of the Egyptian army and the Exodus concludes with “no reconciliation, no understanding, no covenant.” On the other hand, Laban’s chase concludes with a covenant with Jacob, an agreement between two parties who separate in peace. Writes Rabbi Kahn, “The Vilna Gaon teaches us that the Torah tells the same story twice; there are two possible endings to the story. We have no trouble identifying with the theme of being pursued by an enemy or a potential adversary who has not treated us with the respect we deserve... The question is, what happens to the ‘other’?” How will the story end? Will the Jewish people separate from its neighbors in conflict and dispute following the model of the Exodus, or will our story end with mutual respect, reconciliation and agreement?

In its decades-long quest to achieve peace with its neighbors, Israel has long worked to reach a conclusion to the conflict through negotiation, dialogue and mutual respect. When it found partners for peace, as it did both with Egypt and Jordan, Israel has demonstrated a readiness to make significant sacrifices to successfully negotiate a peace agreement. Without a partner, efforts to force Israel to make concessions do not lead to peace; instead, they encourage the Palestinians to remain entrenched in their recalcitrant positions, making the possibility for peace ever more remote and difficult to achieve. At the United Nations General Assembly in 2011, President Obama made precisely this point when he stated that, “Peace is hard work. Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the United Nations—if it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now. Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must live side by side. Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians—not us—who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them ...”

President Obama’s sentiments five years ago continue to resonate today. True peace will only come when the Palestinians follow Laban’s example, and finally sit down with Israel and negotiate in good faith. Then, and only then, will the two parties achieve a just and lasting peace agreement. ■

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.