

MARCH 28, 2016

Parashat Shemini - Parah

A Sanctuary of Unity

Take a he-goat for a sin offering (Leviticus 9:3)

קחו שעיר עזים לחטאת (ויקרא ט:ג)

In his address to the 18,000-plus delegates at this year's AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [opened](#) by extending his condolences to the families of the victims of terrorism that struck Brussels last Tuesday. He noted that the wave of terror that has struck all around the world in recent months, from Paris, to California, to Brussels, represents a terror group with no real demands other than the goal to destroy our way of life. "Their basic demand is that we should simply disappear. Well, my friends, that's not going to happen." How then do we defeat them? "The only way to defeat these terrorists is to join together and fight them together. That's how we'll defeat terrorism—with political unity and with moral clarity. I think we have that in abundance."

Parashat Shemini describes the ceremonial sacrifices that were offered at the inauguration of the Tabernacle. Aaron was commanded to offer "a bull-calf for a sin-offering ..." (9:2) and the Children of Israel were told to offer "a he-goat for a sin-offering..." (9:3) Why were they bringing sin offerings? For what sins would these animals atone, and why did Aaron offer the first sacrifice, but not the second? The Sages in the Midrash (Torat Kohanim 9:3) taught that, "Moses said to the people: You have on your hands the first [sinful] offering, and you have on your hands a final [sinful] offering. What is the original offering? 'And [Joseph's brothers] slaughtered a he-goat (and dipped [Joseph's] coat in the blood...)' (Genesis 37:31). And what is the final offering? 'They have made them a molten calf...' (Exodus 32:8) Let the he-goat come and atone for the act of the he-goat, and let the calf come and atone for the Sin of the [Golden] Calf..." According to the Midrash, Aaron, who had been intimately involved in the creation of the idolatrous Golden Calf, must offer the sacrifice which would atone for that sin. The he-goat, on the other hand, would atone for a sin that had occurred many years beforehand—the sale of Joseph on the part of his brothers into slavery—an act which they hid from their father Jacob by slaughtering a goat and dipping Joseph's coat in blood. The he-goat sacrifice, which atoned for the sin that tore the fabric of the family unity apart, was offered not by Aaron who personified peace and unity, but by the people themselves. As the Tabernacle in the desert and later the Temple in Jerusalem were meant to serve as symbols not only of faith and devotion to God, but also as places of unity and brotherhood among the Children of Israel. Only when that sin had been atoned could the people stand together in the structure dedicated to national and communal unity.

For decades, support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship has served as the common goal that unifies not only the Jewish community, but the American political establishment. This year, we find ourselves in the throes of a bitter political season and a climate that discourages political leaders from agreeing on any issue. For this reason, we must marvel at the strong, proud support that we heard for Israel last week from candidates on both sides of the aisle. Israel has been—and must continue to be—a source of unity within our community. Israel never has been, nor can ever be a partisan issue. Any attempt to paint a specific political party as "stronger" or "weaker" on Israel not only belies the tremendous bipartisan support that Israel receives throughout the U.S. government; such efforts weaken the entire movement, and pose the greatest danger to our national cause to support, protect and defend the Jewish state.

Before the Children of Israel could unite around the Sanctuary, they first had to atone for a sin of disunity which divided them. We, as a community, must commit ourselves to avoid this same grave mistake as we move forward this year, knowing that we must protect and defend Israel only when we stand together as a united community. ■

Un-Kosher Elections

And the swine, because he parts the hoof (Leviticus 11:7)

ואת החזיר כי מפריס פרסה (ויקרא י"ז)

For an animal to be considered kosher by the Torah it must fulfill two vital requirements. “Whatsoever splits the hoof and is wholly cloven-footed and chews the cud among the beasts that may you eat.” (11:3) The bible lists a number of animals that do not meet this requirement, including the camel, hare and badger, all of which chew their cud, but do not have split hooves. Only one animal is listed as having split hooves, but does not chew its cud, “and the swine, because he parts the hoof, and is cloven-footed, but chews not the cud, he is unclean to you.” (11:7) While no non-kosher animal is “less” kosher than any other (they’re all equally non-kosher), Jews historically specifically avoid consuming the pig, not only for sanitary reasons, but for ideological ones as well. As opposed to all other animals which exhibit their non-kosher features for all to see, the pig represents the one species that externally proclaims itself to be kosher (with its split hooves), while hiding its internal non-kosher attribute from view. For this attribute of “pretending” to be something that it is not, the Sages in the Midrash compared the pig to the Edomite kingdom that mercilessly persecuted the Jewish community. The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 11) wonders, “Why is [Edom] compared to a pig? To teach you that just as a pig, when he rests, he sticks out his [split] hooves and says, ‘See how I am pure!’ Similarly, the Kingdom of Edom steals and plunders while it pretends to represent fairness and justice...”

Today, Iran follows in the footsteps of ancient Edom, pretending to represent the values of freedom and democracy by highlighting recent election for its representative body, when in fact that very election, rather than serving as an expression of freedom, cemented the stranglehold of radical clerics on the Islamic Republic.

Last month, many media outlets heralded the outcome of the election in Iran, touting the results as a major victory for Iranian moderates. [The Atlantic reported](#) that, “Reform-minded and more moderate candidates swept all 30 parliamentary seats in Tehran, the country’s most heavily populated province, and won 15 of 16 seats on the influential Assembly of Experts.” Yet, a closer look at the elections themselves demonstrates that little has changed in Iran either before or after the elections. First and foremost, elections are only meaningful in a true democracy where citizens are able to freely choose their leadership. Iran is not a true democracy, but instead is run by a theocratic government controlled by a clerical supreme leader. The Iranian Majlis (parliament) and Assembly of Experts—the body responsible for choosing the next Supreme Leader—have little actual day-to-day power. In last month’s elections, Iranians were able to vote only for preapproved candidates, and chose the ones they believed were the most pragmatic. Well over 90 percent of reformist candidates running for the Majlis and 60 percent running for the Assembly of Experts were not permitted to run. Fifty members of the current parliament were disqualified as too moderate. In addition, many of the candidates who ran as “moderates” are in fact radicals who ran on the moderate list (as most of the other candidates were disqualified). Writing in the [Huffington Post](#), Saeed Ghasseminejad, an associate fellow at Foundation for Defense of Democracies and adjunct professor of finance at Baruch College wrote that, “What happened this February was hardly an *election* in the way that Americans understand the word. Voters were allowed to choose only candidates who adhere to Iran’s official ideology, who even once elected, have their power strictly limited by unelected institutions.”

In other words, while they called it an “election,” it wasn’t a “kosher” election in any sense of the word. Iran might be showing its hooves to the world, but we cannot allow ourselves to be fooled. Iran’s “democracy” is anything but kosher. ■

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