

MARCH 21, 2016

Parashat Tzav

Windows of Opportunity in Times of Turmoil

Command Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 6:2)

צו את אהרן ואת בניו (ויקרא ו:ב)

If anyone asked us to predict what the map of the Middle East would look like two years ago, few would have been able to foresee the radical changes that have taken place in such a relatively short period of time. Syria as a country effective no longer exists. ISIS is operating in the Sinai Desert. What remains of Iraq serves as a proxy for Iranian interests. Yemen and Libya find themselves in the thralls of sectarian and terrorist violence, while Iran now enjoys international legitimacy. This turmoil has caused millions of refugees to stream towards Europe, a migration that will inexorably change the global political landscape. In short, the stability that we took for granted until only a short time ago no longer exists. We live in terribly turbulent times, and turbulent times demand that we take action.

This past week, we read in Megillat Esther the classic story of how Esther and Mordechai save the Jewish people from the threat of annihilation and genocide. When Haman reveals his diabolical plan, Mordechai instructs Esther to immediately visit the king and beg him to rescind the wicked decree. When Esther demurs, Mordechai reacts forcefully and angrily telling her, “Think not of yourself, that you shall escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For if you hold your peace at this time, then relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish...” (Esther 4:14) Commentators wonder: Why is Mordechai so forceful? What’s the rush? Why not wait for Esther to be summoned to beg for the Jews’ salvation? Malbim (on Esther 4:13) explains that, “Every affliction that comes upon Israel has a limited period, time and ‘Day of Judgment’ designated for deliverance through the preparations and causes that were prepared for salvation.” In other words, history offers us a window of opportunity— but only a brief one. We must seize that brief window of opportunity when it opens, for if we wait, we may miss our chance to avoid calamity.

Parashat Tzav begins with the instruction that Moses “command Aaron and his sons...” (6:2) about the laws of the sacrifices in the Tabernacle. Why the need to “command?” Why not “tell” Aaron, or “speak” to him? Rashi explains that the term “command” denotes alacrity, urgency and speed. In other words, as Aaron takes a position of importance, leadership and power, he must always be ready and willing to act with speed and urgency on their behalf. Commenting on the qualities of good leaders, Ramban (on Exodus 18:21) writes, “One who is appointed [as a leader] of the community must open his heart to communal matters with all of his heart and spirit...and he must be a person of alacrity, and quick in his service of heaven - that he is not silent nor does he rest until that matter is completed...”

Just as there is turmoil in Israel’s neighborhood, here at home we are witnessing a different type of turmoil in the arena of politics. Every election year brings surprises, but we all sense that this election cycle is fundamentally different. Pundits from every media outlet declare that no one expected the political season we have witnessed—on either side of the aisle. Political leaders struggle to find firm footing in such a turbulent atmosphere. Somehow, all of us sense that things really are different this year, and no one really knows how the election season will play out, both for the presidency and in Congressional elections as well. This turmoil, while unsettling, also offers an opportunity; It demands that those of us in the pro-Israel community take action, to assure that a strong U.S.-Israel relationship remains a core foreign-policy priority for the United States.

The turmoil surrounding Israel in the Middle East will inevitably lead to a window of opportunity that Israel will either seize to achieve a great salvation; or, God forbid, that window will be missed, and we will all lament the lost chance and the devastating consequence that follow. Will the Jewish state have the tools it needs when that day comes? Will it have the strong political and international support it needs? Will it have the diplomatic backing that has allowed it to act in the past, and will be even more crucial in the future? The answer to all of these questions depends on us: do we act this year with alacrity, as leaders? Or do we procrastinate and delay, and perhaps miss our own window of opportunity to ensure critical support for the Jewish State? ■

Powerful Partnerships

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When the University of Chicago opened its Institute of Molecular Engineering in 2011, it immediately put water scarcity at the top of the institute's agenda, recognizing that its unique approach to the problem—relying on engineering at a molecular level to produce breakthroughs—brought with it the possibility of game-changing solutions. When the Institute sought a research partner to collaborate with, it turned to Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva, one of the most parched places on Earth, which has found unique solutions to conquer the challenge of water scarcity. According to the [Chicago Tribune](#), “In laboratories in Chicago and the Israeli desert, scientists are crafting radical new approaches that may one day rejuvenate the world's water-starved regions.” This is precisely the types of partnerships that important U.S. legislation was intended to foster.

Parashat Tzav outlines the laws of many of the sacrifices that were offered both in the Tabernacle in the desert, as well as in the Temple in Jerusalem. Sacrifices were handled not by the people themselves, but by the priests who served as the representatives of the people. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed writes that aside from Temple service, the priests had two primary functions: to educate the people in the service of God, and to be messengers of kindness and peace, following in the footsteps of their forefather Aaron who taught his disciples to, “love peace and pursue peace, love thy fellow creatures and bring them closer to Torah” (Avot 1:12). Rabbi Melamed writes, “The Torah established that priests would not receive a portion of land in Israel, and that their livelihood would depend on the produce offerings and priestly gifts of the Israelites. In that way, the priests would be free to learn Torah, educate the people, and guide them. Since the Israelites provide them with sustenance, all the people of Israel become partners in the spiritual work of the priests. Due to the fact that they do not own land, and do not partake in the competition involved in earning a livelihood, they can more easily develop their love and kindness towards the entire nation.” Through their shared obligations towards each other, the Torah outlines a partnership between the priests and the people that benefit the nation as a whole. While the priests were freed of the need to worry about their own sustenance, they were obligated to use that freedom to develop the spiritual, intellectual and ethical core of the nation.

Since the passing of landmark legislation over a year ago, the United States and Israel have been working together to strengthen their own partnership, taking meaningful measures that will benefit both nations. On Dec. 19, 2014, President Barack Obama signed the United States-Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2014—a landmark piece of legislation that dramatically enhances America's relationship with the state of Israel. By declaring in legislation that Israel is a “major strategic partner” of the United States, the measure laid the foundation for expanded U.S.-Israel cooperation in a wide variety of spheres, including defense, intelligence, homeland security, cyber security, energy, water, agriculture, and alternative fuel technologies, like the water research collaboration between the University of Chicago, and Ben-Gurion University. Numerous other joint projects are in the works as well. Recently, [Sinclair Community College in Dayton became the first pilot site to test new Woosh filtered water stations](#) outside of Israel. The water stations will offer patrons the ability to purchase filtered, chilled water without the need for additional bottles or transportation costs destructive to the environment.

These initiatives point to the power of partnership, and the mutual benefits of working together. Like the priests and the people, whose collaboration brought prosperity and spirituality, the growing partnership between American and Israel will bring increased innovation and prosperity to the people of both nations. ■