



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 25, 2016

Parashat Yitro

Hearing with the Heart

And Jethro heard (Exodus 18:1)

וישמע יתרו (שמות יח:א)

Last week, the senseless murder of Dafna Meir shocked the state of Israel and Jews around the world. Meir, a mother of six, was [stabbed to death by a fifteen-year-old terrorist](#) at the front door of her home in front of her young daughter. Meir, a nurse at Soroka Hospital in Be'er Sheva, who also counseled women on fertility issues, spent her energy healing the sick of all faiths with great sensitivity and care. She listened to CDs in her car to teach herself both Russian and Arabic so she could better care for, and understand, her patients. While we all felt a twinge of pain over yet another act of senseless terrorism against an innocent civilian in Israel, did her death spur us to take action? Did it compel us to ask what constructive role we, and our representative in Congress, can take toward ending the violence and the incitement behind it?

Of all the people in the world who learned of the miraculous salvation of the Israelites from Egypt, only one person—Jethro—came to join the nation on their journey. Rashi (on verse 1) wonders: What specifically did Jethro “hear” that caused him to come and join the Israelites? Rashi explains that Jethro heard about “the war with Amalek and the splitting of the Reed Sea.” Yet, this only begs the question. A great many people heard about these monumental events. Only Jethro came. What prompted him to come? One possible answer to this question lies in asking a different question: instead of asking about “what” Jethro heard, we must instead ask “how” he heard about it.

After his appointment as king of Israel, God appeared to the young King Solomon in a dream and asked him what request he would like to be granted. Instead of asking for power, wealth or military might, Solomon simply asked for “an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil...” (Kings 1 3:9) In Hebrew, Solomon asked for a *lev shomea*—“a hearing heart.” From this verse Rabbi Nachman of Breslov derived the lesson that, “hearing requires the heart.” While we might physically listen with our ears, we only truly hear when we listen with our hearts. This type of hearing not only moves us emotionally, but drives us to take action. Jethro was so moved that he went to the Israelites when he heard about their struggles—including the terrible war with Amalek—because he listened with his heart and he committed himself to take action to help.

At Dafna Meir’s funeral, Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett [connected](#) the wave of terrorist gripping Israel with the incitement by Palestinian authorities. “The Palestinian version of ‘Sesame Street’ teaches children to murder Jews and then, as we see, they go and do it,” Bennett said. Last November, 369 members of the U.S. House of Representatives [called upon Palestinian President Abbas](#) to end the official incitement to violence common in the Palestinian territories. At the time, the incitement surrounded lies about the Temple Mount. Two months later, the incitement remains. We must hear the cries of innocent Israelis like Dafna Meir murdered, simply for being Jewish, by children who are constantly bombarded with violent messages of hatred. It is not enough for us to mourn. We must also take action and continue to highlight the dangerous campaign of incitement to violence promoted by the Palestinian Authority. We must demand that our senators and representatives keep the pressure on the Palestinians to condemn the recent wave of attacks, and encourage them to resume direct peace negotiations with Israel. ■

No Place to Rest

Neither shall you go up by steps (Exodus 20:22)

ולא תעלה במעלות (שמות כ:כב)

In a speech at Harvard University on December 4, 2007, Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 until its dissolution in 1991, urged world leaders to place nuclear disarmament at the top of their agendas... When Gorbachev came to power he [recalled](#), “People at the time were saying one thing... ‘Do whatever you can to prevent nuclear war.’” Looking back years later, he noted that by 2007 those concerns were not the foremost worry on people’s minds. Nonetheless, Gorbachev called for again making them a top priority stating, “If you don’t move forward, sooner or later you begin to move backward.”

The final commandment of Parashat Yitro seems minor: “Neither shall you go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness be not uncovered thereupon.” (Exodus 20:22) The altars both in the Tabernacle and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem were constructed according to this rule, for rather than climbing a series of steps to offer sacrifices on the altar, the priests walked up a long ramp. While the verse offers one explanation for the commandment, commentators present a number of deeper explanations for the prohibition of steps leading to the altar of worship in the Temple. The late Israeli scholar, Rabbi S.Y. Zevin, noted that while a ramp stands at an angle, stairs are level. Taking each step requires effort, but one can ascend a few stairs and then comfortably stop and rest before continuing the journey upwards. On a ramp one need not take big steps, but one’s feet must always be tensed to maintain balance on the slope. There is no “resting” on a ramp without exerting effort. If you place a ball on a stair it will stay exactly where it is. If you place a ball on a ramp, it will roll down unless it is constantly being pushed upward. Commenting on Rabbi Zevin’s message, Rabbi Macy Gordon wrote, “The altar teaches us that there is no stairway to Heaven. There is no place to rest even if one has taken big steps. While one doesn’t have to take giant steps or leaps at once, one cannot rest on some plateau in religious life.”

What’s true in religious life is true in many other areas of life as well. Business leaders will tell you that there is no such thing as remaining stagnant. The moment you think you’re doing everything right and all you need to do is keep sailing with the wind at your back, you’re asking for your ship to sink. When we “take our foot off the gas” and stop to rest, we find ourselves moving backwards rather than remaining in place. For this reason, we must remain especially vigilant in our efforts to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon.

Last week marked “Implementation Day”—the day that the International Atomic Energy Agency verified that Iran had met its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the United States and its allies began to dismantle its elaborate regime of economic sanctions against Iran and unfroze tens of billions of dollars in Iranian assets. While Iran’s actions have extended U.S. estimates of Tehran’s breakout time to produce the fuel for a nuclear bomb from several months to one year—which is a positive step—the agreement also gives Iran the right to build an industrial scale nuclear program after only 15 years, which will eventually give it the capability to break out within days. It is precisely due to this concern that we must hold Iran to the commitments it made when it accepted the JCPOA. We must ensure that the United States keeps a vigilant watch to ensure that Iran adheres to the agreement. And we must ensure that Congress and the executive branch live up to their commitments, responding to Iranian violations of the JCPOA with certain, swift and severe penalties. And, now isn’t the time to stop and rest, hoping that the situation with Iran will remain stable for the near future, instead we must confront Iran’s dangerous behavior, including its continued support for terrorism and arming of regional proxies across the Middle East.

Mikhail Gorbachev had a great point: If you’re not moving forward, sooner or later you begin to move backward. If the international community “moves on” to other issues and ignores Iran’s provocative behavior, Iran will sense our complacency and covertly resume its quest for nuclear weapons. Like the ramp leading to the altar, there can be no place to rest in our fight to prevent Iran from achieving this dangerous, destabilizing goal. ■

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.