

AUGUST 14, 2017

Parashat Re'eh

Communal Choices

A blessing and a curse (Deuteronomy 11:26)

ברכה וקללה (דברים יא:כו)

Last week, former Israeli combat medic Elor Azaria began an eighteen-month sentence in a [military prison](#) after being convicted of killing terrorist Abdel Fattah al-Sharif. In an attack last March, Sharif stabbed a soldier in Hebron. Video footage showed Azaria shooting Sharif after he had been neutralized as a threat by IDF forces. The Azaria case has grabbed Israeli headlines for months, stirring strong emotions across the Jewish state. David Horowitz, founding editor of the Times of Israel, applauded the conviction, [writing that](#), “the very fact that Azaria was painstakingly tried in an unimpeachably credible Israeli court of law, represented reaffirmation of Israel’s determination to preserve its morality—its insistence on preventing our enemies, our terrorist foes, from reducing us to their cynical, murderous depths.” In sending one of its own sons to prison for taking the life of a combatant, Israel sent its citizens and the world a powerful message: in a region engulfed by terrorists who choose and extol death, murder and destruction, Israel promotes the value of life and hold those who choose otherwise accountable.

In Parashat Re'eh, Moses emphasizes the importance of consistently holding true to the values that guide us. “Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse...” (Deuteronomy 11:26) Moses encourages us to embrace the blessings of the values transmitted to us through Jewish tradition. The Midrash (*Sifrei Devarim* 53) sees Moses’ encouragement as a personal choice between life and death. “Why does [Moses speak of a blessing and a curse]? Because it is written, ‘that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse.’ (30:19) Perhaps a person from Israel would say, ‘Since the Holy One placed before us two paths, the path of life and the path of death, we should follow whichever path we choose.’ For this reason, it is written, ‘And you shall choose life!’” (ibid) According to the Midrash, following tradition demands that we choose life, in the spiritual and literal sense. For this reason, we must uphold the value and sanctity of life, even when that requires making difficult choices.

This idea can help explain a textual anomaly in our verse. Ibn Ezra (on verse 26) notes that when Moses tells the people to “Behold!” he does so in the singular form—*Re'eh*. Yet, in the next verse he speaks in the plural—*asher tishme'un*—“if you [plural] shall listen to the commandments...” (verse 27) Ibn Ezra explains that in the first verse, Moses “is speaking to each and every individual.” Why then does he switch to the plural? Moses teaches us that the common values shared by a society stem from the choices made by every individual in society. When citizens choose the proper path, ultimately their society and their government will reflect those choices. Conversely, when they succumb to sin and impropriety and allow that behavior to become normative, the community must hold these individuals accountable.

It is for this reason that the Azaria sentence carries so much significance. Horowitz writes, “facing the ongoing lone-wolf Palestinian terror wave, for instance, our troops must make instant decisions about drivers and pedestrians approaching them at roadblocks, people walking past them on the streets. Are they slowing down? Did they hear my shouted order to halt? What’s in their bag, what’s in their pockets, what’s in their hands? Is that a phone, a knife, a gun? Do nothing, and you may die, and other innocent Israelis may die. Do something, and an innocent Palestinian may lose his or her life, and yours will forever turn on the incident.” Every day, Israeli soldiers and citizens choose life, whether that life is Israeli or Palestinian, innocent or even a neutralized terrorist. Individuals’ actions reflect on the community as a whole; Moses teaches us that if someone fails to choose life, the community must demand better.

The Azaria sentence demonstrates that Israel recognizes that every soldier represents the Jewish state and it will hold citizens accountable when they act differently. Underlying each of these actions is Israel's desire to reject the values of hatred, antagonism and revenge and to demonstrate in the most fundamental way that both the citizens of Israel and their government will, whenever possible, choose life. ■

Giving and Receiving

Because that for this thing (Deuteronomy 15:10)

כי בגלל הדבר הזה (דברים טו:י)

In this week's parashah, Moses summarizes the power and importance of helping others. "If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land the Lord, your God, is giving you... you shall open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking... You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing the Lord, your God, will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors." (Deuteronomy 15:7-10) Moses' language conveys critical messages: from the phrase, "from one of your brothers" we learn that we must view those in need as our brothers, and we must help them as we would members of our own families. The words, "in your land the Lord your God is giving you" emphasize that the blessings we have are a gift from God, and accepting this allows us to share those gifts with others.

The Sages in the Talmud (Shabbat 151b) note another phrase: "Because of this thing the Lord, your God, will bless you..." They explain that the word *biglal*, because, is similar to the word *galgal*, or spinning wheel, connoting the shifting of fortunes over time. Prosperity is like a spinning wheel—sometimes one person is on top, and other times he spins to the bottom. Kli Yakkar (on verse 11) views this metaphor in a more practical sense. He writes, "Every giver will in the end be a receiver, for this is the manner of all being...that every giver will in the end need to receive as well." In other words, we must give because we know that one day we will find ourselves on the receiving end.

America has long appreciated the value of giving to other nations, both because we understand the importance of sharing America's bounty with those in need and we appreciate that sometimes giving to others is the best way to advance America's interests around the world. A small investment in foreign aid can help avert wars and ensure our diplomats safety. This is especially true with regard to the Middle East. Terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaida, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic State (ISIS), prey on the world's vulnerable to spread their anti-Western ideology and recruit new adherents. By advancing economic, political and social stability in other nations, foreign aid can help prevent recipients of assistance from becoming breeding grounds for terrorism. In a testimony submitted to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs, AIPAC CEO Howard Kohr [noted](#) that, "prevention—whether of terror attacks, weapons proliferation, pandemic disease, economic meltdown, societal collapse or the spread of radical ideology—is always cheaper and easier."

The Trump administration's fiscal year 2018 budget request proposes a 32 percent cut in U.S. foreign aid. This cut would be short-sighted, and actually counter America's long-term interests. At about one percent of the overall federal budget, foreign aid is a cost-effective investment that enables Washington to engage across the globe and helps preserve America's safety, security and prosperity. The U.S. also benefits greatly from the aid it distributes. Security assistance to Israel, which is included in the foreign aid budget, promotes the development of innovative military technologies, which help protect U.S. troops. In addition to bringing education, health care and infrastructure to places in need, U.S. foreign aid to other nations expands the American economy through the development of new markets. As we learn from our parashah, giving to countries in need doesn't just help others. Our giving ensures that as the wheels of history turn, other nations will help to further the interests of the United States around the world. ■

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.