



Sermon Tidbits

JULY 24, 2017

Parashat Devarim

Improving Lives to Build Peace

Our brothers the children of Esau (Deuteronomy 2:8)

אחינו בני עשו (דברים ב:ח)

Over the past few weeks, Israeli and Palestinian officials reached two significant agreements that will improve the lives of the Palestinian people. First, the [Times of Israel reported](#) that Palestinian and Israeli officials met near the West Bank city of Jenin “to turn on the first-ever piece of Palestinian-owned electricity [that] will provide a much-needed boost to the Jenin area, which has suffered power outages more than any other Palestinian West Bank region. The station also represents the first time the Palestinians will be able to control the distribution of the electricity to their own towns and cities.” Then, Israel [signed an agreement](#) with the Palestinian Authority “that will provide millions of cubic meters of drinking water to the Palestinians from a desalination process.” These two deals represent important milestones; they will not only bring critical resources to the West Bank, but also create new foundations for collaboration between Israel and the Palestinians.

Parashat Devarim demonstrates how this kind of economic interaction can strengthen the relationship between neighbors. In our *parashah*, Moses recounts an interaction with Edom, the nation that descended from Jacob’s brother Esau, on the journey to the land of Israel. Moses requested permission to travel through the country, and was instructed to “purchase food from them for money, so that you may eat; and you shall also buy water from them for money, so that you may drink.” (2:6) Though Edom rejected the request, Moses explains, “We passed by from our brothers the children of Esau...” Why does Moses describe the people of Edom as “our brothers” even after they refused Moses’ request? Rashbam, in his commentary on the Torah (on verse 4), explains that while the Israelites did not cross through Edom there was contact between the people. “Nonetheless, [the Israelites] would buy from [the Edomites] as they travelled whatever they needed, and this is the proper truth.” Though the Edomites were wary of permitting the Jewish people to travel through its territory, the two nations established a basis for brotherhood through economic interaction.

This type of economic relationship represents one way that Israel and the Palestinians may work towards cooperation. The water agreement helps the Palestinians provide a needed resource to its population and helps Israel proceed with its joint Jordanian project to replenish the Dead Sea, which is in danger of evaporating. Israel’s Minister of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources Yuval Steinitz [described the electricity deal as a “win-win project”](#) for Israel and the Palestinians. “It’s good for Palestinians because they will get more electricity, which will be more stable and of higher quality. It’s good for Israel because...the responsibility [for Palestinian electricity] won’t fall on the shoulders of the Israeli Electric Corporation,” he said.

America played an important part in the water agreement, which was reached with the input and assistance of the United States government. The [Jerusalem Post noted](#) that President Donald Trump has “made clear that working toward a lasting peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is a top priority for him.” A [White House statement](#) said that, “the administration has urged the parties to undertake efforts to promote an environment that is conducive to advancing peace, and this new agreement—the second major Israeli-Palestinian agreement signed this week—is another indication that the parties are capable of working together to achieve mutually beneficial results.”

Hopefully, these agreements represent building blocks that will nurture trust between the two sides, and lead towards the goal of a lasting peace in the Middle East. ■

The Letter and Spirit of the Agreement – Shabbat Chazon

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz (Isaiah 1:1)

חזון ישעיהו בן אמוץ (ישעיהו א:א)

Traditionally, Jews have referred to this Shabbat as “Shabbat Chazon,” named for this week’s *haftarah* which precedes the solemn day of Tisha B’av. The *haftarah* begins with the words *chazon Yishayahu*, “the vision of Isaiah...,” from the first chapter of Isaiah. In the reading, Isaiah bemoans the coming destruction of the Jewish nation, attributing the devastation to the moral decay that consumed the nation in the form of hypocritical religiosity: “Of what use are your many sacrifices to me? says the Lord. I am sated with the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle; and the blood of bulls and sheep and he-goats I do not want... Wash, cleanse yourselves, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes, cease to do evil. Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:13-17)

The Sages (Tosefta Menachot 13:4) teach that Jerusalem was destroyed during the First Temple era due to the rampant commission of sins of “idolatry, sexual depravity and murder.” Society had broken down ethically and morally. While we see from Isaiah’s admonition that the nation continued to bring offerings and sacrifices at the Temple, the people failed to recognize the contradiction between their sinful behavior and their religious offerings. Isaiah reminds us that God abhors our fulfillment of the letter of the law by offering sacrifices while ignoring the spirit of religiosity and humility inherent in those offerings. Without the spirit behind the laws, we render our fulfillment of the technical aspects of the law virtually meaningless. This notion carries great meaning in religious life, where we can become so accustomed to the notion of ritual that we forget the spirituality and meaning behind the ritual act.

This concepts extends beyond religious life. For example, when it comes to Iran we continue to see a government that is fulfilling the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. Recently, the White House certified to Congress that Iran remains in compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal. Despite this certification, Iran continues to advance lethal activities throughout the Middle East in an attempt to destabilize the region and enhance Iranian influence. For this reason, the day after certifying the JCPOA the White House announced new sanctions issued by the Treasury Department against entities supporting Iran’s military and missile program, such as groups that aided Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and groups associated with Iran’s ballistic missiles program.

According to the [New York Times](#), “The new sanctions were intended...to emphasize the administration’s determination to find new ways to penalize Tehran for activities not covered by the nuclear accord.” According to [Time Magazine](#), a U.S. official said that, “[President] Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and ‘the entire administration judge that Iran is unquestionably in default of the spirit’ of the agreement.” Officials noted Iran’s continued development and testing of missiles, its support of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and its escalating cyber activity, actions that threaten the security of both the U.S. and Israel. While the Islamic Republic is technically honoring the terms of the deal, it violates the spirit of an agreement intended to lead to peaceful reengagement with the rest of the world. Moving forward, the United States must continue to push back against Iran’s violent, destabilizing behavior throughout the region. We must encourage our legislators to quickly complete work on the [Iran sanctions legislation currently under consideration](#) and forward it to the president to sign.

While Iran’s technical adherence to the JCPOA is important, as long as it continues to violate the spirit of the agreement by supporting terrorism and advancing its ballistic missile program, the United States must continue to keep the pressure on Iran to rejoin the international community of nations dedicated to peace. ■