

JULY 31, 2017

Parashat Vaetchanan

Choose Life or Choose Death?

And I beseeched the Lord (Deuteronomy 3:23)

ואתחנן אל ה' (דברים ג:כג)

Consider the following typical math problem found on worksheets in grade schools across America today: “*There are 124 dogwood trees and 107 maple trees currently in the park. Park workers will plant 111 more dogwood trees today. How many dogwood trees will the park have when the workers are finished?*” Now consider a similar, but very differently worded problem found in an official Palestinian Grade Four mathematics textbook: “*The number of martyrs of the First Intifada during 1987–93 totaled 2026 martyrs, and the number of martyrs of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Intifada in the year 2000 totaled 5,050 martyrs while the number of the wounded reached 49,760. How many martyrs died in the two Intifadas?*” This simple math problem serves as just one example of a worsening trend of anti-Semitic tropes and glorified violence against Jews and Israelis in Palestinian textbooks. A recent [comprehensive study of these textbooks](#) by IMPACT-se (Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education) catalogs a Palestinian Authority school curriculum rife with hatred for Jews and Israel that extols violence and glorifies martyrdom and death.

Judaism has long communicated the exact opposite message, promoting the sanctity of life. We see this value for life the very first passage of Parashat Vaetchanan, in which Moses pleads for the ability to enter the land of Israel, rather than pass away in the dessert: “And I beseeched the Lord at that time... Let me go over, please, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and Lebanon.” (Deuteronomy 3:23-25) In his commentary on the Torah, Don Isaac Abrabanel asks: “Why did Moses expend so much effort to enter the Land and extend his life? Did he not know the greatness of his spirit, and that with its separation from his [physical] body he would cling to his Creator where he would enjoy wondrous, immeasurable spiritual benefit?”

Why, wonders Abrabanel, was Moses so interested in life, when his death at the age of 120 would have brought him eternal spiritual bliss? Abrabanel offers four answers, including that Moses wished to fulfill the mitzvot connected with the land of Israel and that he desired to visit Mount Moriah. Underlying each of Abrabanel’s answers is the Jewish appreciation for human life. Even when told about his upcoming demise, Moses continued to choose life, yearning for additional opportunities to bring good, holiness and spirituality to the world. He wished to follow his own advice to always “Choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:19), and he categorically rejected any glorification of death

When societies glorify martyrdom and those who choose death and murder over life, the results are all too predictable. Two weeks ago, nineteen-year-old Omar al-Abed broke into the Halamish settlement near Ramallah, where he entered the Salomon family home and [began a stabbing spree](#), killing three members of the family, including grandfather Yosef, 70, and adult children, Elad, 36, and Chaya, 46. What prompted a teenager to go on a murderous rampage and kill three adults in cold blood as they peacefully celebrated Shabbat? According to the [Washington Post](#), hours before the attack al-Abed posted on his Facebook page. “He vowed to die a glorious martyr’s death and left instructions for his imagined burial rites. He thumped his chest as a true ‘Son of Palestine.’ ...and he called Jews ‘pigs and monkeys.’”

How is peace possible when Palestinian children grow up in an educational system that teaches a nationalism that is incompatible with Israel’s existence? How can two sides live together when the Palestinian curriculum remains

committed to eternal war and the veneration of martyrdom? Marcus Sheff, Chief Executive Officer of IMPACT-se [explains that](#) “The PA curriculum should cease describing Israel as the source of all evil. It should cease educating for settling millions of Palestinians in Israel and give up the concept of ‘resistance’ (conquest of your neighbor in stages) and ‘martyrdom’ (suicide killings) as recurring motifs. [Children] should not be used as cannon fodder for an old generation of guerrilla fighters and new generation of Islamists.”. There cannot be lasting peace until the Palestinian Authority stops teaching its students to be martyrs and ends the demonization and rejection of the state of Israel. Until Palestinians “choose life” by raising their children on a culture of nonviolence and acceptance, peace will remain a distant dream. ■

The Right Thing to Do

And you shall do that which is right and good (Deuteronomy 6:19) ועשית הישר והטוב (דברים ו:יט)

For some time now, the world has been aware of Israel’s efforts to aid Syrians wounded in the ongoing civil war. According to [Ha’aretz](#), “In the last four years [Israel] has treated 1,600 Syrians—70 percent of the Syrian wounded who have entered Israel.” Few realized that the scope of Israeli aid to Syria goes far beyond the humanitarian medical aid. Several weeks ago, Israel “made public for the first time...the extent of its humanitarian aid to the civilian population living just across its northern border in Syria,” the [Washington Post reported](#). “The Israeli army opened its store rooms and briefed journalists on the full extent of a humanitarian operation it calls ‘Good Neighbor.’ As part of the effort, Israel has transferred 360 tons of food, 450,000 liters of gasoline and 50 tons of clothing to Syria. It has also sent large quantities of painkillers, anesthetics and basic medicine for diabetes and asthma.” Why has Israel opened its doors to the citizens of a country with which it has officially been at war for decades? Israel is helping for the very simple reason that, as we learn in Parashat Vaetchanan, the Torah calls upon us to go above and beyond our basic duty with our neighbors.

Among the many *mitzvot* found in our parashah is the injunction, “And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 6:18) The commandment itself seems vague and difficult to define. What exactly does Moses refer to when instructing us to do “that which is right and good?” Rashi, following the interpretation of the Sages in the Talmud explains that this refers to, “compromise, and going beyond the letter of the law.” What prompted the Sages to offer this interpretation? Ramban (on verse 18) explains, “The intention of this is that from the beginning God said to keep God’s commandments, testimonies and laws as God has commanded them. And now it says: even regarding what God did not command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God’s eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness... with their neighbors and friends, in any business matter, and regarding ordinances of any town or country... one should do what is good and right regarding everything, including compromise, acting beyond the strict demands of the law.” Moses commands us to strive to go beyond what is legally expected, and commit ourselves to being people of goodness and righteousness.

And, with regard to the human tragedy in Syria, that is exactly what Israel is doing. In addition to the food, fuel, clothing, baby formula, diapers and medicine Israel is supplying, the [Times of Israel reported](#) that the Israel Defense Forces “is also currently facilitating the construction of two clinics within Syria, which will be run by locals and workers from NGOs. This includes logistical coordination and sending over building materials and medical equipment, according to the army. These clinics are meant to support 80,000 Syrians living in the area near the Syrian city of Quneitra, just across the border. Inside Israel, another clinic is also being constructed. This one, being built at an army outpost that currently carries the bland name Outpost 116, will be guarded by the IDF but staffed entirely by NGO officials. It will be operated only during the day and is therefore meant to be used to treat Syrians suffering from less severe injuries.” Why does Israel make such a significant effort to help the Syrians? Part of the effort is undoubtedly aimed at both [improving the security situation](#) on Israel’s border as well as improving Israel’s image within the Syrian civilian population. But beyond the utilitarian benefits of the aid project, the primary motive for Israel’s actions is simple: Judaism instructs us that going beyond the letter of the law to help a neighbor—or a neighboring country’s population is simply the right thing to do. ■