

JUNE 5, 2017

Parashat Beha'alotecha

“We’re the Good Guys, Not the Perfect Guys”

Why have You treated Your servant so badly? (Numbers 11:11)

למה הרעות לעבדך (במדבר יא:יא)

Last week [Reuters](#) reported that, “A U.S. military investigation...acknowledged that more than 100 civilians were killed in a U.S. air strike on a building in the Iraqi city of Mosul in March during operations against Islamic State militants.” The American investigation of the bombing (which was targeting snipers on a residential building), “concluded that the amount of explosives in the U.S. bomb...was not enough to bring down the building. The investigation added that the bomb was dropped at the front of the building while structural engineers found that the damage and crater was at the back of the building.” In a [Face the Nation interview](#), U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis was asked about the bombing and the heavy civilian casualties. He explained that, “We believe that what happened there was that ISIS had stored munitions in a residential location, showing once again the callous disregard that has characterized every operation they have run.” Mattis added a critical point: “The American people and the American military will never get used to civilian casualties. We will fight against that every way we can possibly bring our intelligence and our tactics to bear. People who had tried to leave that city were not allowed to by ISIS. We are the good guys. We are not the perfect guys, but we are the good guys. And so we are doing what we can.”

The notion of perfection—and the seeming demand for it from our military—represents a subtle but important theme in the story of Moses and the “complainers.” When the nation becomes hungry for meat and complains, Moses reacts in a seemingly unexpected manner asking God, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.” (Numbers 11: 11-15) Moses’ despondency drives him to ask for death rather than face failure in his mission to lead the people. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a beautiful essay about Jewish leadership, explains that the Bible explicitly describes even our greatest leaders as human, fallible and prone to misstep. He [writes](#), “The Hebrew Bible is remarkable for the extreme realism with which it portrays human character. Its heroes are not superhuman. Its non-heroes are not archetypal villains. The best have failings; the worst often have saving virtues.” We don’t expect our leaders to achieve perfection; instead we expect them to strive for it, even if that means that at times they will fail. To expect human beings to be perfect is to paralyze them and prevent them from taking any action at all. Instead, we demand that they perform seemingly impossible tasks, but also appreciate that at times, perfection is an unattainable goal that they will nonetheless strive to achieve.

During the 2014 Gaza War, Israel was accused of shelling a United Nations School which sheltered Palestinian civilians, killing ten civilians. The attack drew massive international condemnation, including from the United States, which said that it was [“appalled” by the “disgraceful” attack](#), and prodded Israel to “do more to meet its own standards and avoid civilian casualties.” Last summer, Israel closed its military investigation of the disturbing episode without filing charges in the case. According to the [Guardian](#), “The military report said that shortly before the incident three Palestinian fighters were spotted riding a motorcycle in Rafah. A decision was made to make an airstrike on them using a low-explosive missile to minimize damage to surroundings and after a sweep of the area showed no civilians in harm’s way. It said that after the missile was launched the men unexpectedly headed off a roundabout with multiple exits, toward the school gate.” In the fog of war, especially when conducted in close proximity to civilians, even the most careful military procedures sometimes cannot prevent unintended loss of life. Israel in fact took

extraordinary measures to protect the Gaza civilian population. Tragically, the militants who tried to take refuge in the school cared less about the civilians there than Israel did.

Both the United States and Israel take great pains to avoid civilian loss of life, despite the callous disregard of the enemy for the lives of their own people. When these terrible tragedies occur we must mourn their loss and push our leaders to work hard to prevent them from reoccurring. Nonetheless, we must admire military leaders who expect perfection of themselves, setting a bar they can never ultimately reach. People do make mistakes, especially when fighting terrorists who perpetrate acts violence and war in the midst of a civilian population, hoping to reap the rewards of the public outcry when their people are killed. We must place the blame on the terrorists, and not demand an unrealistic perfection from the forces fighting to free those civilians from the grip of terror, hatred and death. ■

Every Voice Matters – the Basis of Bipartisanship

Gather to Me seventy men (Numbers 11:16)

אספה לי שבעים איש (במדבר יא:טז)

Earlier this year Senators Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Christopher A. Coons (D-Del.) circulated a letter in the Senate addressed to U.N. Secretary General António Guterres regarding what the lawmakers called “entrenched bias against Israel at the world body.” The letter, signed by all 100 U.S. Senators noted “Through words and actions, we urge you to ensure that Israel is treated neither better nor worse than any other U.N. member in good standing... We are deeply committed to international leadership and to advancing respect for human rights. But continued targeting of Israel by the U.N. Human Rights Council and other U.N. entities is unacceptable.” As the Jerusalem Post [noted](#), “it’s not often that all 100 U.S. senators agree on something.” The fact that every member of the U.S. Senate from both political parties signed the letter sent a powerful, critical message not only to the new U.N. leader, but also to the world at large—in the United States Congress, America’s strong friendship with Israel is a bipartisan priority.

During the difficult incident of the complainers, Moses grows despondent and complains that, “I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me.” (Numbers 11:14) In response, he is instructed to, “Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them and bring them to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you...” (11:16) Ramban explains that this group represented the precursor for the Sanhedrin, the great Rabbinic Assembly of the ancient era. According to the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 2a*), the Sanhedrin numbered seventy-one elders, corresponding to the seventy elders noted in our parashah in addition to Moses, who served as the head of the assembly. What then is the significance of the number seventy? Why did the Torah require such a large number of elders? Ramban (on verse 16) explains that, “He commanded this number of judges of Israel, for this number would by definition include all opinions [that are possible in a given case] since it comprises all powers, and there will be no case too difficult for them to handle...”

Moses was commanded to gather seventy sages in order to ensure that all reasonable opinions are considered on a legal matter before making a final decision. Every voice from across the ideological spectrum carried meaning and weight, without which the Sanhedrin could not reach a sound decision. Today, in an era of political hyper-partisanship, this ideal represents the bedrock of bipartisanship upon which a strong US-Israel relationship is based.

At face value, bipartisanship is a practical political calculation—political fortunes rise and fall over time, so linking support for Israel to a particular party would inevitably fail to protect the Jewish State. Yet, bipartisanship isn’t simple pragmatism. Rather, it forces us, in the pro-Israel community, to listen to every voice on a myriad of issues, and take into account the wide ranges of opinions with regard to support for Israel. Rarely will every individual agree—as they did with the U.N. letter. But every Senator and member of Congress knows that because bipartisanship is a core value to our community, his or her opinion is truly important and will be carefully considered. Like the seventy voices of the Sanhedrin, when bipartisanship is a fundamental value, every voice really does count. ■

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.