

FEBRUARY 13, 2017

Parashat Yitro

Standing up for What's Right

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian heard (Exodus 18:1)

וישמע יתרו כהן מדין (שמות יז:יב)

On Dec. 23, the United States [abstained from vetoing](#) an anti-Israel resolution at the United Nations Security Council. The United States' abstention deeply disappointed Americans supportive of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, and was immediately met with criticism from members of Congress on both sides of the aisle. Incoming Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer (D-NY) called the failure to veto the U.N. resolution, "extremely frustrating, disappointing and confounding." Schumer noted that, "Whatever one's views are on settlements, the U.N. is the wrong forum to settle these issues. The U.N. has been a fervently anti-Israel body since the days of 'Zionism is racism' and, unfortunately, that fervor has never diminished." Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan (R-WI), stated that "This is absolutely shameful. Today's vote is a blow to peace that sets a dangerous precedent for further diplomatic efforts to isolate and demonize Israel." Israel is fortunate to have strong-willed friends in the United States, who are ready to stand up for what's right even in the face of strong political pressure. One could argue that these friends are simply following in the footsteps of Jethro.

When we first meet Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, in Parashat Shemot, the text doesn't tell us much about him. In our parashah, we learn that Moses, the leader of the Jewish nation, treated Jethro with great respect and deference: "And Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down and kissed him..." (18:7) What merit did Jethro have to become the in-law of the greatest leader in Jewish history, and to be afforded such great honor and deference from none other than Moses? According to the Midrash, Jethro was a man who stood up for what was right. The Talmud (Sotah 11a) states that Pharaoh did not devise the strategy to enslave the Jewish people on his own. Rather, it was suggested by a member of his cabinet of most trusted advisors. "Balaam who devised [the plan to enslave the Israelites] was [eventually] slain; Job who silently acquiesced, was afflicted with sufferings; Jethro, who fled, merited that his descendants should sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [in Jerusalem]." According to the Talmud, Jethro occupied a prominent position in the Egyptian government as a trusted advisor to Pharaoh. When confronted with what he considered an immoral plan to subjugate the Jewish nation, rather than retain his position in silent acquiescence, he spoke out. The Midrash (*Otzar Hamidrashim*) adds that Jethro protested so vigorously to Pharaoh that the king became exceedingly angry at Jethro and said to him, "Flee to your homeland!"

Like Jethro, America's elected representatives have demonstrated a willingness to speak out on behalf of Israel and stand up for what they believe to be right. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) [described](#) the "ill-conceived resolution on Israeli settlements" as "another shameful chapter in the bizarre anti-Israel history of the United Nations." Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) [expressed sentiments](#) echoed by a significant number of elected representatives from both sides of the aisle when he said that, "The United States must use its influence and posture at the United Nations to promote our values and support our allies. It has long been a bipartisan sensible policy of the United States to support direct bilateral negotiations between the parties to find an agreement. We have long stood beside Israel in the face of these kinds of politicized resolutions whose only goal is to undermine confidence in a negotiated peace process. Going forward, I look forward to continuing to work towards strong bipartisan support for a peace deal negotiated directly between the parties." Despite the frustration and disappointment of the U.N. resolution's passing, perhaps a silver lining can be found in the fact that so many of Israel's friends followed Jethro's lead, and stood up for what is right. ■

An Admonishment and a Warning

And you shall teach them (Exodus 18:20)

וְהִזְהַרְתָּ אֹתָהֶם (שְׁמוֹת י"ח:כ)

Iran has been busy—and not in a good way. Last week, in an interview on Iranian television, “Mojtaba Zonour, a member of Iran’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission and a former Islamic Revolution Guards Corps official, boasted that an Iranian missile could hit Tel Aviv in under seven minutes, the semi-official Fars News Agency reported.” According to the [Times of Israel](#), he added that, “Tehran would strike the Israeli coastal city and raze to the ground a U.S. military base in Bahrain if the enemy makes a mistake.” This came less than a week after Iran test launched its “Khorramsahr” medium-range ballistic missile, which due to its size and range, is inherently capable of carrying nuclear warheads. The launch represented at least the sixth ballistic missile test since the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 which prohibited any Iranian nuclear weapons activity. Members of Congress and the new administration have come to recognize that without a firm, concrete response, Iran’s dangerous and provocative behavior will continue. As Jethro instructed Moses, a strong, stern message sometimes represents the most appropriate form of instruction.

During his visit to the Jewish camp, Jethro observed Moses as he dutifully attended to the needs of the fledgling nation. Then, Jethro offered his son-in-law important organizational advice that would allow Moses to properly and efficiently lead his flock. Most importantly, he advised Moses to install a graduated system of leadership in which lower appointees would address common problems while forwarding the truly difficult and important issues to Moses. When we take a careful look at the language of the interchange between the two men, we find that even before Jethro offered his organizational advice, he commented on Moses’ relationship with the people. When describing his efforts to bring the word of God to the people Moses explained that, “When they have a matter, it comes to me; and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know (*ve'hodati*) the statutes of God, and God’s laws.” (18:16) Jethro advised Moses that, “You shall teach them (*ve'hizharta*) the statutes and the laws and shall show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do.” (18:20) To convey the idea of teaching, Moses used the Hebrew word *le'hodia*—to inform—while Jethro utilized the Hebrew word—*le'hazhir*—to warn—which implies a very different type of instruction. Noting Jethro’s subtle change in language, Ramban (on verse 20) explains that, “In this [language] too there was counsel [on the part of Jethro] that Moses should strongly admonish them and warn them of the commandments and punishments [in case of transgression]...” Sometimes, simply “informing” does not suffice. Rather, we must also offer admonition and warning, in order to prevent a violation of the law.

Members of Congress and the Trump Administration now recognize that “informing” Iran about our expectations has failed to curb the Islamic Republic’s provocations, and that the time has come for a stronger response. Following the Iranian missile test, Democratic and Republican members of Congress in both the House and Senate spoke out against the Iranian provocation. Two weeks ago, National Security Adviser Mike Flynn [declared that](#) the United States is, “Officially putting Iran on notice.” Two days later, a bipartisan group of 22 Senators, led by U.S. Senators Ben Cardin (D-Md.) and Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), the Ranking Member and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [sent a letter to President Trump](#) encouraging more concrete action against Iran’s activities. They wrote that, “Iranian leaders must feel sufficient pressure to cease deeply destabilizing activities, from sponsoring terrorist groups to continued testing of ballistic missiles.” The same day, the United States [placed sanctions](#) on 13 individuals and 12 companies involved in procuring technology for Iran’s ballistic missile program and associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force. “The Trump Administration will no longer tolerate Iran’s provocations that threaten our interests,” National Security Adviser Michael Flynn said in announcing the sanctions.

The Trump Administration has made it clear that the United States intends to push back against Iran’s unacceptable behavior, and these new sanctions mark an important first step. The time for quiet diplomacy has long since passed. These initial efforts represent both an admonition to Iran, and a warning that it must immediately scale back the dangerous activities that threaten Israel, the United States and the entire Middle East. ■

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