

SEPTEMBER 3, 2018

Parashat Netzavim

The Power of Choice

You shall choose life (Deut. 30:19)

ובחרת בחיים (דברים ל:יט)

U.S. National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) recently returned from three days in Israel meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders. During that time Bolton clarified that there will be no “quid pro quo” in peace talks with the Palestinians as a result of the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem being the Jewish state’s capital. Bolton also suggested that President Trump was disappointed with the Palestinian response to the move. Bolton conveyed that this could have been an opportunity for the Palestinian leadership to make a pitch for concessions that would benefit their cause. Instead, the Palestinian Authority officials have refused to meet members of Trump’s cabinet, declaring them unfit to act as honest mediators in negotiations. Moving forward, the current U.S. administration is working on a long term Middle East peace plan, but at the present time the contents are guarded and have not been made public.

“See I have put before you today life and good, and death and evil...and you shall choose life...” (Deuteronomy 30:15-19). The 13th century scholar and saint Rebbeinu Yonah of Girondi counts this injunction—*and you shall choose life*—as a positive mitzvah to choose that which is good, and categorizes it as one of the lofty levels of human achievement and distinction (*Shaarei Teshuva*, Gate 3). Rabbeinu Yonah is suggesting that there is a mitzvah to *be* a chooser; a person of will. How are we to understand this? We need to consider the fact that the defining factor of the human being—that which makes him/her completely unique and different from all other creatures—is the capacity of free will. It is this capacity that makes one’s actions meaningful, and empowers a person with responsibility, and enables an individual to be commanded to do good and stay away from evil and thereby merit divine reward. It is the choice between good and evil that manifests the true human power of free will. Being a chooser means to be in control of oneself; to not blindly follow one’s natural desires and base instincts.

This lesson is especially meaningful during this season when each of us, on a personal level, work on self-improvement and *teshuvah*; it is in our hands to make critical choices that generate greater happiness and fulfillment. This lesson is also to be taken to heart on a grand scale as well. Nations across the globe are faced with difficult decisions and often have to choose a given path. These decisions affect millions of lives and their country’s success or failure on the world stage.

A durable Israeli-Palestinian peace can be best achieved through direct negotiations between the two parties, resulting in a Jewish state living side by side in peace with a [demilitarized Palestinian State](#). Unhelpful resolutions at the United Nations Security Council and unilateral Palestinian actions at other international bodies will only undermine the prospects for peace. Time and again, Israel has demonstrated its willingness to make tough sacrifices for peace. To give just two examples, in August of 2005 Israel withdrew from Gaza and relocated 8,500 citizens from their homes and their communities. And in 1982, Israel withdrew its forces and uprooted Jewish settlers from the Sinai Peninsula to implement its 1979 treaty with Egypt. Today, Israel stands ever ready to take the necessary steps that will lead to a lasting peace with her Palestinian neighbors. [Netanyahu](#) has stated that there is no substitute for the United States to broker a peace deal between the two peoples. “I think there’s no substitute for the United States. As the honest broker, as a facilitator, there’s no other international body that would do it.”

As the new Jewish year is upon us we pray we soon see an end to the violence that Israel faces on an ongoing basis. We pray that the leadership on both sides take this ancient biblical lesson to heart—choosing a path that leads to “life,” tranquility and a lasting peace. ■

A Collective Covenant

..that you should enter the covenant of God (Deut. 29:11)

לעברך בברית ה' (דברים כט:יא)

The Trump administration reinstated sanctions on Iran after withdrawing from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Washington regarded this deal as insufficient for denying Tehran the means to make an atomic bomb. The U.S. turnaround outraged Iran, which has taken a defiant stance. U.S. National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#) said that the sanctions that the United States imposed on Iran have been more effective than expected. The Iranian economy has been beset by high unemployment and inflation. Thousands of Iranians have protested in recent weeks against sharp price rises of food items, lack of jobs and state corruption. “I think the effects, the economic effects certainly, are even stronger than we anticipated,” Bolton said. “But Iranian activity in the region has continued to be belligerent: what they are doing in Iraq, what they are doing in Syria, what they are doing with Hezbollah in Lebanon, what they are doing in Yemen, what they have threatened to do in the Strait of Hormuz.”

This week we read the parasha of Nitzavim. “*A'tem nitzavim ha'yom kulchem lifnei Hashem*—You are all standing today before God...*L'avracha be'vrit*—For you to enter the covenant...*Asher Hashem koreit imcha ha'yom*—that God is making with you today.” (29:9-11). What was unique about this covenant? Did the Jewish people not enter an eternal covenant at Sinai? Additionally, it is worth noting that the verse changes from the plural (*a'tem*—you are all) to the singular (*l'avracha, imcha*—you). What is the significance of this grammatical change?

The classic commentator of the *Kli Yakar* (1550-1619) suggests that the original covenant had been broken by the sin of the golden calf when the nation of Israel rebelled. Not only was this a sin against God, this was also a sin in that the nation had not been sufficiently bound to one another. The Israelites did not carry out the responsibility to stop one another from erring. They acted selfishly and in essence said, “If others sin that’s not my business.”

Therefore a covenant of collective responsibility needed to be implemented and reintroduced. This is hinted to in the phraseology of the verse where it moves from plural to singular, namely, a covenant of the plural being transformed into the singular. A well-known parable depicts this idea. This can be compared to people traveling together in a boat. One passenger takes out a drill and begins to pierce the wood beneath his seat. “What do you care?” he replies. “I am only drilling under my own seat!” It is not enough for us as individuals to do the right thing. We must look around, see who might need help and recognize that we are responsible for those who we are able to help.

In the effort to offset the nefarious actions of Iran, it will take partnerships and the cooperation of the U.S. and her allies to enforce measures that will make a lasting impact. Recently U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a [major policy address](#) laying out the administration’s strategy on Iran following America’s withdrawal from the JCPOA. The United States had joined China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany and Iran in this July 2015 nuclear deal, which remains in effect between the other parties. Secretary Pompeo made it clear that the United States seeks a new deal that promises to end all facets of Iran’s illicit behavior, including its regional aggression, support for terrorism and continued threats against U.S. allies—especially Israel. In exchange for such a deal, the United States is prepared to normalize relations with Iran and end sanctions—including primary U.S. sanctions that have prevented American companies from doing virtually all business with Iran.

At this auspicious time of year we pray for peace. As we take stock, we express our gratitude and give thanks to our administration for their determined policy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and are indebted to the U.S. for ensuring political support for Israel at the U.N. When America and Israel stand shoulder to shoulder, working together, we can be most effective in the pursuit of freedom and liberty, for us, and for all people across the globe. ■

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