

JANUARY 8, 2017

Parashat Vaera

Fear of Speaking Out

For impatience of spirit (Exodus 6:9)

מקוצר רוח (שמות ו:ט)

As word of widespread protests emerged from the Islamic Republic of Iran, the world began to learn of the oppressive tactics employed by the radical regime to suppress citizens protesting the dire economic situation that has gripped the country, which included widespread arrests and killings of protesters. According to the [British Metro newspaper](#), a prominent judge in Iran warned that some could face the death penalty for protesting, after hundreds of people were arrested. In addition, President Hassan Rouhani has acknowledged the public's anger over the Islamic Republic's flagging economy, though he and others warned that the government would not hesitate to crack down on those it considers lawbreakers.

Should we really be surprised? According to [Human Rights Watch](#), “the hardline factions that dominate the security apparatus and judiciary continued to crack down on citizens for the legitimate exercise of their rights, particularly the right to free speech, in blatant disregard of international and domestic legal standards.” In truth, the mullahs of Iran have literally taken a play out of Pharaoh's playbook.

Parashat Vaera opens with a divine assurance that Moses is instructed to convey to the Children of Israel. Despite decades of suffering and a significant setback during the first foray with the Pharaoh, God promised that the nation would not only be delivered from bondage and freed from Egypt, but would return to the Holy Land. After Moses faithfully conveys this message to the people we read that, “they did not listen to Moses because of impatience of spirit, and because of [the] cruel bondage.” (Exodus 6:9) We can intuitively understand the meaning of the second phrase—*avodah kashah*—“cruel bondage.” Who has the patience to listen to promises of deliverance when the crack of the whip keeps you hard at work? What though is the meaning of the first, seemingly more significant cause—*kotzer ruach*—“impatience of spirit?” Ramban explains, “*Kotzer ruach* refers to the fear that Pharaoh will slay them with the sword, just as their officers had warned Moses.” After Moses' failed meeting with the Pharaoh, the people complained to him that, “you have brought us into foul odor in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to place a sword into their hand[s] to kill us.” (Exodus 5:21) Quite simply, the Israelites could not hear Moses' message of hope due to the fear that even a hint of protest on their part would prompt an Egyptian massacre.

Iran's political leaders today are simply following in the footsteps of a long list of brutal dictators harkening back to ancient Egypt. The terrible events in Iran serve as a vivid reminder that while we often focus on Iran's aggressive and dangerous activity around the world, Iran is a gross violator of human rights in its own country. Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Christians and Bahais face daily persecution; homosexuality is punishable by death; political elections are fraudulent; media censorship is widespread and journalists, both domestic and foreign, are regularly arrested and held without trial or charge.

After the initial wave of recent protests in Iran, Dr. Raz Zimmt, a research fellow at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), who specializes in Iran, [told the Jerusalem Post that](#), “The regime has already proved itself as determined and ready to use all force necessary to suppress mass protests, as we saw in 2009, when there was a much more serious threat, with hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets. So far, we haven't seen the most aggressive methods of suppression, we haven't seen live fire, apart from in two instances, which demonstrates that the

situation isn't so dangerous at the moment. But I have no doubt that if the situation becomes more extreme, and tens or hundreds of thousands of people go to the streets, then we know that it is the unambiguous goal of this regime to survive, and they'll do everything they can to do so."

The world is dealing with a regime willing to jail, muzzle and kill its own people while ignoring the will of the international community. It behooves us as Americans—and as Jews who remember the pain of slavery in Egypt—to stand with the Iranian people as they confront their brutal dictatorship. ■

Protecting Critical Infrastructure

And they will turn to blood (Exodus 7:17)

ונהפכו לדם (שמות ז:יז)

According to Israel's National Cyber Bureau (NCB), the Jewish state experiences approximately [1,000 cyber-attacks](#) each minute, perpetrated by state-sponsored groups, independent hackers, organized crime cartels and terrorist organizations. Israel's Electric Corporation (IEC), the country's largest supplier of electrical power, is one of the country's most targeted critical infrastructure facing some 10,000 threats every hour. Recognizing that a cyberattack represents the best, most effective way to cripple the Jewish state, Israel has invested heavily in cybersecurity. It has established a national security campus in Beersheba, a National Cybernetic Taskforce for coordination and long term planning to protect Israel's critical infrastructure, and the IDF was one of the first armies in the world to establish a situation room devoted entirely to cyber-defense. We find a reminder of the potential damage of such an attack from an interesting source in our *parashah*.

After the Pharaoh refuses to free the Israelite slaves, Moses is instructed to approach the Egyptian king at the Nile. There he is told to convey the message that, "Behold, I will smite with the staff that is in my hand upon the water that is in the Nile, and it will turn to blood." (Exodus 7:17) Why did the first plague specifically target the Nile? Rashi (on verse 17) explains that, "Since there is no rainfall in Egypt, and the Nile ascends and waters the land, so the Egyptians worship the Nile. He therefore smote their deity and afterwards He smote them." When we examine the Midrash upon which Rashi based his comments, we notice a subtle but significant difference. In the Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 9:8) we read, "Why were the waters smitten first? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, so the Holy One said, 'I will first smite his god and then his nation.'" While Rashi includes the deistic motivation, his commentary begins by noting the critical value of the Nile as a water source to the Egyptian people. Through this subtle textual addition, Rashi adds another explanation for why the Nile was first targeted: it represented Egypt's most fundamental infrastructure. There could be no better way to get not only the Pharaoh's attention, but that of the entire nation.

Today, those who wish to do harm to not only Israel, but the United States as well, recognize this fundamental truth: our critical infrastructure sites might be our most vulnerable points of attack. Understanding this reality, the United States has not only established its own [cyberwarfare defense initiatives](#), but has also reached out to collaborate with Israel to gain valuable knowledge and insight from the Jewish State.

Early last year, [the U.S. House of Representatives passed](#) the United States-Israel Cybersecurity Cooperation Enhancement Act of 2017, cosponsored by Reps. Jim Langevin (D-RI) and John Ratcliffe (R-TX). While the legislation continues to wind its way through Congress, the United States has already reached out to Israel to establish a joint cybersecurity task force. In addition, at a Tel Aviv conference this past June, U.S. Homeland Security Advisor Thomas Bossert, [announced the creation](#) of an Israeli-American bilateral cyber working group. Bossert said that the agencies will be, "focused on finding and stopping cyber adversaries before they enter networks, before they reach critical infrastructure and identifying ways to hold bad actors accountable. We believe the agility Israel has in developing solutions will resolve in innovative cyber defenses that we can test here and take back to America."

The plagues remind us of the grave danger of damaging attacks on national infrastructure. It is gratifying to know that innovations in cybersecurity developed in the Jewish state are not only protecting the citizens of Israel. They are also helping secure critical assets across the United States. ■

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