

JULY 23, 2018

Parashat Ve'etchanan

Israel Goes to Space

And now O Israel, listen (Deut. 4:1)

ועתה שמע ישראל (דברים ד:א)

On February 13, 2019, an Israeli-built unmanned [spacecraft](#) will land on the moon, making Israel the fourth nation in the world to achieve a controlled landing on the moon's surface. "We will put the Israeli flag on the moon," said Ido Anteby, CEO of SpaceIL who is spearheading this initiative. The probe launches in December from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Once landed, it will stay for two days to carry out a Weizmann Institute of Science experiment to measure the moon's magnetic field. Seeking to affect an impact similar to that of the 1969 Apollo Lunar Mission, the space mission aims to inspire: to invigorate a passion for science in Israeli youth and to remind humanity of the dream of getting to the moon.

As we listen to Moses' closing address in this week's *parasha* and throughout Deuteronomy, we hear a leader who sought not to gain power, but to teach the Jewish people. Moses proclaims: "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and to the judgments which I teach you to do, in order that you may live" (Deuteronomy 4:1). In nobly seeking to enhance the lives of those around him, Moses offers his followers a path to enrich their lives. Choosing to teach rather than rule, Moses epitomizes the Jewish approach to leadership.

In a powerful essay, "Who is fit to lead the Jewish people?" Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik contrasts two Jewish perspectives on leadership: the leadership of a king and the leadership of a teacher. The Torah severely limits kings' power. They must not multiply gold, wives or horses and must not to consider themselves above their fellow Israelites (Deut. 17:20). According to Ibn Ezra, even the notion of appointing a king is problematic; it's permitted, but not an obligation. On the other hand, our tradition holds unlimited regard for teachers. The Talmudic sages suggest that the highest levels of reverence and honor, beyond even the honor afforded to biological parents, is reserved for teachers. In the words of Lord Rabbi Jonathan [Sacks](#): "When someone exercises power over us, he or she diminishes us, but when someone teaches us, he or she helps us grow. That is why Judaism, with its acute concern for human dignity, favors leadership-as-education over leadership-as-power."

SpaceIL's groundbreaking announcement has caught the attention of many. But it's not simply an opportunity for Israel to make history. The space mission embraces the ideal of learning, teaching and reaching for vistas that enhance mankind's place in this world. Moreover, it is a success story of collaboration. For three decades, the U.S. and Israel have [worked together](#) to "boldly go" where only a few other countries have ventured. In 1985, the U.S.-Israel space relationship began when the Israel Space Agency and NASA began cooperating on a case-by-case basis. A decade later, the two agencies regularized collaboration through signing the first agreement outlining areas of cooperation in the peaceful use of space. And in 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the bipartisan United States and Israel Space Cooperation Act ([H.R. 1159](#)) which directs NASA to continue working with the Israel Space Agency (ISA) to identify and pursue peaceful space exploration and scientific initiatives of mutual interest. Determined to grow mankind's knowledge base and explore the "final

frontier,” Israel and the United States, together, embody a true embrace of the Jewish value that Moses displays in *Parashat Ve’etchanan*: leadership through teaching. ■

Israel: Small in Number, Great in Character

For you are the smallest in number... (Deut. 7:7)

כי אתם המעט... (דברים ז:ז)

For over 100 days, since the beginning of the “March of Return” campaign and the rioting on the Gaza border, children and parents in southern Israel have been sleeping in shelters. They have had to contend with fires caused by the incendiary kites and balloons flown from Gaza to scorch swaths of Israeli farmland, not to mention ongoing rocket attacks. In just one weekend, Hamas fired [200 rockets and mortar shells](#), some of which hit homes and a synagogue over Shabbat. But the residents of southern Israel have not given up. Seeking to encourage the community under fire, Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#) recently visited the town of Sderot along the Gaza border. Netanyahu said, “It’s important Hamas understands it’s facing a steel wall, and that this wall is primarily made up of a determined government, steadfast local leadership, Zionist communities we will of course continue strengthening, and of course the IDF.” With the true spirit of Israeli resiliency, he continued, “We’ve been fighting terrorism for 100 years, fighting it with great strength...and we’re determined to win.”

The end of *Parashat Ve’etchanan* features a verse epitomizing the nature of the Jewish people: “The Lord did not set his affection in you and choose you because you were more numerous than other people, for you are the fewest of all people” (Deuteronomy 7:7). The verse’s message directly contrasts earlier descriptions of the Jewish people as being “as many as the stars” (Genesis 26:4) or journeying the desert with “about six hundred thousand men on foot” (Exodus 12:37). The commentator S’forno explains that this new distinction of the Jews as “the fewest” suggests that God did not choose a nation for the sake of his own honor; if so, God would undoubtedly have chosen a mightier and more numerous people. God’s choice was not based on numbers; it was based on love for the nation of Israel.

Historically, the Jews have remained a small people. Today, we are less than a fifth of one percent of the population of the world. Even in the Jewish state, our brothers and sisters in the state of Israel are a small nation surrounded by larger and possibly stronger forces. As such, Israel must remain steadfast and on-guard to protect her safety. Even more so, we—as “the fewest of all people”—must unify in our efforts to fortify her self-defense.

Yet, while the right to self-defense of the Jewish people and of Israel is instinctual to us—ingrained deeply into our history and religious texts—there are many who seek to challenge this right. The United Nations and other international organizations frequently and disproportionately single out Israel for exercising her basic right of [self-defense](#), despite her unprecedented precautions to limit civilian casualties. Fortunately, Israel has more than the “fewest of people” beside her to tackle these ongoing attacks. Through Congressional resolutions and Presidential statements, the American government has repeatedly recognized the legitimacy of Israel’s defense of her citizens and that this defense sometimes requires action against terrorist organizations beyond her borders.

Unfortunately, Israel is again defending her citizens against the terror of Hamas and being questioned along every step. With the resilience demonstrated by the citizens of southern Israel, it is incumbent upon us to unite again with the very characteristic that *Parashat Ve’etchanan* names as our strength: the size of our people. While God chose us despite our numbers, we must unite because of our numbers, standing up for Israel’s far-reaching efforts to protect her people from terrorism while upholding a commitment to human rights. ■

Please feel free to use any of the material in Sermon Tidbits, except for direct quotes, without attribution. 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.