

JANUARY 29, 2018

Parashat Yitro

At the Heart of Our Friendship

And they encamped in the Sinai desert (Exodus 19:2) (ויחנו במדבר סיני (שמות י"ט:ב)

In Vice President Mike Pence's [Knesset address](#) during his [recent visit](#) to Israel, Pence strongly reaffirmed America's unique friendship with Israel, its commitment to Israel's ability to defend itself, as well as a steadfast determination to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon. Yet, even before he addressed these critical details, Pence spoke about the foundation of America's connection with Israel. "I am here to convey a simple message from the heart of the American people: America stands with Israel. We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny." While we are touched to see the Vice President of America addressing the Knesset, visiting the Western Wall and paying a visit to Yad Vashem, one of our greatest prides as American Jews is the resilient friendship that the U.S. government shares with Israel. The foundation of this unique alliance goes much deeper than merely addressing practical concerns and pursuing common utilitarian needs. What is it that unites these two nations in close friendship? Our unique alliance is based on [shared values](#).

This week's Torah portion presents the dramatic scene at Sinai—the giving of the Ten Commandments. In a beautiful Midrashic teaching regarding the giving of the Torah (*Mechilta De'Rebbe Yishmael*, Exodus 20:2) the Sages ask, "why was the Torah given in the desert and not in the Land of Israel?" The Rabbis answer that the Torah is to be likened to the desert: just as the desert is free for all to come and appreciate, so too are the words of Torah free for all to learn from and to appreciate. This Midrashic teaching suggests the universal nature of the Decalogue. The lessons that emerged at this seminal moment in human history were meant to inspire a shared vision for all humanity.

A close look at the Ten Commandments reveals the fact that there are virtually no specific rituals to be found. The Ten Commandments accentuate central teachings of humanity: respect for human life, the value of honesty, loyalty to one's partner, the right to personal property, reverence for one's parents and others. In this same vein, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik argued that, "not one commandment refers to worship and ceremony. The ethos pervades the whole scene of the Sinaitic revelation. Even the first five commandments, which refer to the God-man relationship, do not suggest to us any service or cult-performance, nor do we imply that God should be treated differently than the treatment accorded to man." (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav* p. 181).

When we take these rabbinic insights to heart we appreciate even more deeply the significance of the unique alliance that the U.S. shares with the state of Israel. Shared values and common eternal ideals guide and inspire both of our nations. Israel is a unique sanctuary of democracy, freedom and pluralism in the Middle East, protecting all of its citizens' rights. America and Israel share a mutual commitment to same core values. Both nations were founded by refugees seeking political and religious freedom. Both were forced to fight for independence from foreign powers. Both have absorbed waves of immigrants seeking freedom and economic well-being. Israel, like America, features regularly scheduled elections that are free and fair and open to all citizens, regardless of religion, race, or gender.

When our conversations with friends, family and coworkers turn to Israel, all too often we fail to mention the critical connection between our two countries. When we advocate on behalf of a strong Jewish state, we cannot allow

ourselves to take these common values for granted. In this way we can do our share to help ensure that the unique bond between these two noble countries steadily blossoms and thrives. ■

Freedom for All at Sinai

And God spoke all these words (Exodus 20:1)

וידבר אלקים את כל הדברים האלה (שמות כ:א)

On December 28, 2017, Iran's citizens launched a wave of protests demanding political and economic reforms from the government. Here in the United States we have been closely following the reports of this heroic grassroots effort to protest the corruption and oppression of the Iranian regime. Nikki Haley, America's Ambassador to the United Nations, put the Islamic regime "on notice" over its fierce crackdown against the protests. According to [ABC News](#), Haley said the U.S. calls on Iran's government to stop censoring social media outlets and to restore Internet access—and calls on the international community to "do more" than issue statements of support.

We, as Jews, earnestly empathize with the plight of the people of Iran and applaud their bravery and courage. Their story is very much our story—an oppressed people fighting back against a regime who wishes to squelch the basic rights and aspirations of its people. Throughout our history, we as a people have endured the wrath of aggressive and multiple abusive regimes and tyrants. This week's Torah portion tells the remarkable story of the Israelites' salvation from our Egyptian oppressors and the story of that defining moment in our history when we gathered to accept the Torah at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Employing a bit of poetic license, the Rabbis noted that the idea of freedom is etched on the very tablets of the Ten Commandments. "The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved [*charut*] on the tablets" (Exodus 32:16). But our Sages teach, "Read not *charut*, engraved, but *cherut*, freedom..." (*Avot* 6:2). What did the Sages of the Mishnah have in mind when they embedded the idea of "freedom" (*cherut*) within the word *charut*, "engraved?" Perhaps the following lesson: while law can be externally imposed such that people only keep it because they fear that if they do not they will be caught and punished, it is far better when people keep the law because they *know* the law, *appreciate* the law, and *internalize* it. In this way, the law becomes a part of who they are. It is *this* law that is "engraved" on the hearts and minds of those who abide by it; a law that provides a path to attain true freedom and happiness.

The story of the Israelites' freedom from Egypt and their internalizing a new doctrine at Sinai serves as a model and motivation for all people. This epic biblical episode transcends time and serves as an inspiration for all those seeking equality and self-realization. The lessons of the redemption of Egypt and the receiving of the Torah at Sinai must also continue to prompt us as Jews to stand behind all people who fight for their right to security, safety, and well-being. We are committed to fulfill this prodigious responsibility and to offer a helping hand to all who pursue this lofty goal.

As American Jews we must express our support of the United States government's commitment to the citizens of Iran as they oppose a regime entrenched in corruption, disregard of human rights and support of regional terrorism. Recent bipartisan resolutions in both the House of Representatives ([H.Res. 676](#)) as well as in the Senate ([S. Res. 368](#)) express support for Iran's citizens and condemn the Iranian government's persistent violation of human rights. On January 9, the House of Representatives passed H. Res. 676 with a vote of 415-2. Let us take the opportunity to thank our representatives for supporting this bill. At the same time, we should urge our senators to support their bipartisan resolution. In doing so, we affirm our Torah-based mission to never stand idly by the blood of our neighbor—whoever or wherever he or she may be across the globe. ■

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