

MAY 14, 2018

Parashat Bamidbar - Shavuot

Angels Bearing Flags

They shall encamp...around the Communion tent (Numbers 2:2)

איש על דגלו...סביב לא מועד (במדבר ב:ב)

Last week, President Donald [Trump](#) withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 deal signed by the United States, Iran, and other world powers to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. The U.S. government's response comes on the heels of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [revealing](#) startling new evidence that Iran has been lying to the international community about its nuclear program for decades. In a memorable [live](#) television speech Netanyahu made bold accusations about Iran's nuclear record. Netanyahu dramatically pulled a curtain to reveal bookshelves containing dozens of files and CDs, copies of original Iranian documents secretly removed from Tehran by Israeli agents in recent weeks. Some of the documents contained details hitherto unknown outside the intelligence community. Most notable was the planned Iranian nuclear arsenal's size: It would have included five nuclear devices with a yield of 10 kilotons each.

Throughout their travels in the wilderness, the Israelites were commanded to set up their tents around their tribal flags. "The Israelites shall encamp with each person near the banner carrying his paternal family's insignia. They shall encamp at distance around the Communion Tent" (Numbers 2:2). What is the significance of the banners? The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 2:3) suggests that the Israelites had witnessed a vision of the angels in heaven at the time of the giving of the Torah. They saw the angels holding flags. Says the Midrash, "at that moment the Israelites desired to have their own flags." The great mystic and poet Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook suggests that angels are representative of a being that has an appointed task. The angel serves as a divine messenger with a particular role to perform. An angel is mission driven.

A flag also represents a distinctive function or trait. For example a flag of a nation or a state may choose symbols and colors that are representative of the unique qualities and values of that place and people. The Midrash is expressing the idea that the Jewish people aspired to be a nation that would fulfill a unique mission in the world. The flags of Israel symbolize the inherent qualities and character of the Jewish people. A flag is raised high for all to see and for all to take note of. The Israelite people proudly waived their flags with a feeling of pride and self-respect knowing that they represented a way of life that stood for kindness, justice and peace. We as Jews continue to wave this flag. We will always stand up for morality and justice to protect our safety and security as a nation and to protect the wellbeing and safety of all nations.

Israel's latest revelations regarding the conduct of Iran's nuclear program underscores the importance of the United States need to have a comprehensive, bipartisan approach to Iranian aggression and pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. The decision to pull out of the JCPOA, provides an opportunity to confront Iran's regional aggression and to address the shortcomings of the deal. It is vital that the United States, working with our allies, again use all the tools of American diplomacy and economic pressure to fix the deals shortcomings and to counter Iran's malign activities. The recent Iranian rocket fire, from Syria into Israel only underscores Tehran's destabilizing presence in the region. ■

What The Nations Learned at Sinai

Honor thy father and mother (Exodus 20:12)

כבד את אביך ואת אמך (שמות כ:יב)

The United States and Israel have developed a resilient friendship, based in large part on an unshakable dedication to common values. These values have made the two countries natural economic partners. Additionally, both the U.S. and Israel share a culture of innovation. Recently, Frutaroman, [Israeli company](#) located in Haifa, which produces flavoring for food products, was purchased by an American company for \$7.1 billion. This makes it the [second largest](#) ever acquisition of an Israeli company following Intel Corp's purchase last year of Mobileye, a Jerusalem—based developer of advanced vision and driver assistance systems, for \$15.3 billion. Our shared values and allegiance to a democratic way of life has laid the foundation and have paved a path to multiple partnerships and collaborations that have strengthened and enriched both countries.

The Talmud (*Tractate Kiddushin* 31a) comments that when the gentile nations heard the first several of the Ten Commandments, such as the proclamation of “I am the Lord your God” and the prohibition against idolatry, they were unimpressed. They said, “It sounds as if God is issuing these commands for his own honor and his own benefit. The nations of the world attributed to God the same human qualities which man is accustomed to. However, says the Talmud, when the nations heard the fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, their perspective changed. When they learned that God wants us to give honor *not* to himself, but to others who he deems to be partners in his creation, the nations of the world suddenly had a change of heart. They were impressed and acknowledged that even the first commandments were proper and just. They saw the truth and recognized the wisdom and goodness of the Torah's teachings. This Midrash implies that too often we are tempted to find fault with others, even with those who are sincere and represent sound the voice of conscience; we attempt to write them off by suggesting that they are merely attempting to exert control and advance their selfish aspirations.

The state of Israel throughout its young history has experienced similar reactions from numerous nations of the world, nations that have opted to undermine and find fault with the Jewish people and the Jewish homeland. These nations have aggressively attempted to delegitimize Israel and even seek her destruction. On the other hand, the state of Israel also has many dear and close friends and allies; nations that have come to truly appreciate the unique contribution of the State of Israel and the worthy values that Israel is committed to and the values and wisdom they openly share with the global community.

As Americans who strongly support Israel, we are proud that we can apply this Midrashic homily to aptly describe the relationship between the United States and Israel. Shared democratic values are the underpinnings of this unique relationship. In the words of Michael [Oren](#), former ambassador of Israel to the U.S. and present member of the Knesset, “Israeli culture allows for a broad spectrum of political beliefs, all of them fervently held and expounded...founded by individuals from dissimilar, often illiberal cultures, pressed with the absorption of millions of immigrants and saddled with the West Bank situation which it has repeatedly offered to resolve, confronted with relentless threat of war, democracy in Israel is today more robust and effervescent than ever. Against incalculable odds, Israel remains unflinchingly—even flagrantly—democratic.”

We also take a great deal of pride in knowing that the state of Israel, since its birth, has stood for these values of freedom and liberty for all of its citizens—Jew, Christian or Arab. Israel protects the rights and liberties of all religions, and does so proudly. As citizens of the United States, we value our freedom by exercising it; by speaking out when needed, and by ensuring that the State of Israel, which shares this essential value with the United States, has the ability to continue to serve as a beacon of freedom for people across the Middle East, who yearn for the right so fundamental to us all: the right to be free. ■

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