

Power to the People

Shabbat Chazon 2015

The Jewish Center

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This past Wednesday, I flew to Washington, DC to join an AIPAC delegation of 28 rabbis from New York and New Jersey. The goal was to meet with our Senators and Representatives and express to them how strongly we feel about opposing the Iran deal. I got into a cab at Reagan airport and told the driver 251 H St. NW.

“Oh, you’re going to AIPAC,” he said. “I’m with Likkud.”

“Oh really,” I said. Anticipating the answer, I asked, “Are you Israeli?”

“No,” he said. “I’m Nigerian.”

“So why do you like Likkud so much?”

“Because in the Middle East you have to be tough. My favorite was Ariel Sharon. We need someone like him here in America.”

Today is the ninth of Av. In some years we have to prod ourselves to feel the weight of the day. Not this year.

Reading the news about a deal that will pave the way for Iran to go nuclear has been enough to put us all on edge. While the Iranians are busy enriching uranium, we’ll be busy enriching them – empowering them to support and export terror throughout the region and beyond.

How easy it will be to contemporize the day and feel as though an unbroken continuum of Jewish persecution includes 5775 no less than it did past epochs in our history.

So allow me to return for a moment to the subject of our Parshah – the first Tisha B’Av gone awry in the story of our people.

It was of course the day on which the spies returned from their ill-fated mission to the Promised Land. We all know the story: Twelve great men; twelve outstanding individuals; twelve preeminent leaders who led the Jewish people down a path paved with discouragement and panic, fear and mistrust. It’s of course because of the Meraglim that the Jewish people are made to wander in the desert for 40 years, sacrificing an entire generation before finally conquering the land of Israel.

Except when we read Moshe’s version of the story in our Parsha this morning, this isn’t what he says. It’s really quite stunning to notice that when Moshe retells the story, he never mentions the spies by name. He never refers to them as the נשיאים – as the princes that they were. He never mentions their status at all.

Moshe never affords the people the opportunity to accuse their leaders of misleading them. Rather than laying the blame on the Meraglim, Moshe lays it squarely on the shoulders of the people.

כו וְלֹא אָבִיתֶם, לַעֲלֹת; וַתִּמְרוּ, אֶת-פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. כִּי וַתִּרְגְּנוּ בְּאֶהָלֵיכֶם, וַתֹּאמְרוּ, בְּשִׁנְאֵת יְהוָה אֱתָנוּ, הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם--לָתֵת אֵתָנוּ בְּיַד הָאֲמֹרִי, לְהַשְׁמִידָנוּ.

You were the ones who refused to go forward!

You were the ones who rebelled!

You were the ones lacked sufficient faith!

לֹד וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה, אֶת-קוֹל דְּבָרֵיכֶם; וַיִּקְצֹף....

It wasn't the words of the spies that enraged Hashem; it was your words!

We know the Torah revolutionized the notion of individual accountability. In the Ancient Near East a son could be punished for the crime of his father. Not so in the Torah. איש בחטאו ישא – the Torah introduced the world to the notion of personal responsibility.

But here Moshe goes even further. The people need to take responsibility not only for themselves, but for their leaders, too.

Sometimes leaders will be smart and decent and conscientious and well-meaning – and they'll still get it wrong – they'll still be mistaken. And when that happens, the responsibility to make things right devolves upon the people.

Yes, the spies were men of renown whom the people trusted.

Yes, they had a near consensus opinion among themselves.

Yes, they had noble intentions.

But none of this diminishes the extent to which the Jewish people had the capacity to make free-willed decisions about how to respond.

The Meraglim themselves are a footnote in history; the people who failed to oppose them are the ones who bear the ultimate responsibility for their failure.

And so it is in our day.

I believe our leaders are good and decent and conscientious and well-meaning. But I also believe they're mistaken.

To those who chafe at the idea of fasting on Tisha B'Av, chazal say:

כדאי הוא בית אלוקינו להצטער על חרבנו על כל פנים יום אחד בשנה.

The destruction of God's home in our world is a worthy enough reason to suffer a little once a year.

As a general matter, I refrain from crossing over into the fraught territory we like to call politics. But once a year – on a matter so grave as to constitute an existential threat to the people of Israel – I hope you'll forgive me.

But I would submit to you that fundamentally this is not a partisan issue at all.

In Washington on Wednesday I stood arm in arm with rabbis across the denominational and political spectra. And there was a refrain among the liberal rabbis. “I’m a lifelong democrat. My members are overwhelmingly liberal. But on this issue we disagree with the President.”

And so it is in Israel. Labor and Likud are not divided on whether or not to support the Iran deal.

- A \$100 billion gift to the world’s most nefarious state sponsor of terrorism is not the answer.
- A provision that makes a mockery of the notion of unfettered inspections is not the answer.
- A deal that guarantees Iran will be nuclear when the terms of the agreement expire is not the answer.
- An arrangement that plunges the region into a nuclear arms race is not the answer.

We can do better. We have to do better. And we have to demand as much from our elected officials. If we allow this moment to pass without taking action, we alone will bear the responsibility.

In 1943 my grandfather joined Rabbi Jung and 300 rabbis from around the country to make a case in our nation’s capital for the lives of European Jews. There was no State of Israel and President Roosevelt wouldn’t take the meeting.

In 2015, the State of Israel is thriving and every one of our elected officials takes our meetings. But if we don’t make our case in the next 47 days, a generation from now historians may bandy about the names of Barak Obama and John Kerry, but we alone will bear the moral responsibility for our inaction.

So I encourage you to take three concrete steps.

First, we have to daven. Whatever the number of times we come to shul in a given week, that number needs to go up. In both frequency and intensity, our Tefillos have to take on a renewed sense of urgency and purpose.

Second, we have to call and write to our elected officials. The arithmetic is very simple. We need 67 votes in the Senate; 290 votes in the House. Our voices matter and we have to make them heard. When the email arrives in your inbox with the details of whom to call and what to say, I assure you that you won’t regret taking the time to open it up and make the call.

Third, there is no organization in the world better positioned to help our cause than AIPAC. If you’re already involved, step up your investment to the next level. And if you haven’t been involved in the past, now is the time.

To these three action steps, let me add one final note.

To live in Israel right now and to watch this story unfold is to feel the sense of abandonment personified. Call your family and friends in Israel and tell them they are not alone. Tell them we love them, we're with them and we're doing everything within our power to thwart the efforts of those who conspire to harm the Jewish people.

The prophet promises that the day will come when Tisha B'Av will become a day of great celebration.

ציון במשפט תפדה.

The power to bring redemption to our brethren – the power to matter – is in our hands.