

FEBRUARY 25, 2008

Parashat Vayak'heil

Coming Together

Vayak'heil Moshe “*Moshe Congregated*” (Exodus 35:1)

Our *parashah* begins with the word *vayak'heil* from the same root as the word *kahal*. Rashi, in his commentary on this *pasuk*, tells us that the word is in the causative *hifil* construction – so Moshe caused the people to assemble. This word that leads off our *parashah* gives us an opportunity to examine what it means for Jews to be “congregated.” Talmud (BT Brachot 6a) tells us that only the Torah study of two people is written down in God’s Book of Remembrance and that a group of ten or more is required for public prayer. While God is with every individual, Judaism is not a do-it-yourself religion. Spiritually, we need each other.

While our special connection to the Jewish people is important, our people have never forgotten that we are part of the larger family of humanity. As American Jews, we can be proud that the expertise found in the Jewish state has played a major role in improving the lives not only of Israelis, but of people around the world.

Israeli and American scientists have joined forces to develop a new orally administered therapeutic treatment for autoimmune diseases. Clinical trials of the new treatment begin in Jerusalem this month. The new product is a combination therapy that brings together intellectual property from Hadasit, the technology transfer company of Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem, Harvard Medical School (HMS) and Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH), a teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School. This is the first official cooperation between the organizations. Autoimmune diseases are disorders caused by an immune response directed against the body's own organs, tissues and cells. There are more than 80 clinically distinct autoimmune diseases, including systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, Type I and Type II diabetes, and Crohn's disease. Today in the US, autoimmune diseases are the third most common major illness. The most common of these diseases affect more than 8.5 million Americans (one in 31).

With the very real security threats and international political problems facing their country, Israelis could be forgiven for turning inward. Instead, this first collaboration between world-class medical research institutions gives all of us hope that these terrible diseases can be conquered. The Jewish state has not forgotten that we are all a part of something larger. ■

High Priority

Uvayom ha'sh'vi'i “*And on the seventh day*” (Exodus 35:2)

Our Sages tell us that this seemingly out-of-place discussion of the laws of Shabbat within the context of the building of the *mishkan* teaches us that building the *mishkan* does not take precedence over the observance of Shabbat. Ibn Ezra comments that no matter how important the *mishkan* might be, Shabbat must always come first.

We all know that it can be difficult to establish priorities. While both the *mishkan* and Shabbat are important, one has to rank above the other. The same is true in our daily lives, in businesses, and in governing nations.

Israel has a difficult choice to make in dealing with the constant barrage of Qassam rocket fire directed at towns and cities in the southern part of the country – especially the city of Sderot. Since 2005, when Israel unilaterally pulled out from all of Gaza, over 4000 rockets have been fired by terrorists in Gaza. In recent months, the pace of rocket-fire has accelerated with some days seeing upwards of 50 rockets directed at innocent Israeli civilians. So far, Israel's response has been measured. But, like any sovereign nation, Israel has the right to defend her citizens. The U.S. House of Representatives is considering a bill condemning the ongoing rocket-fire and reasserting Israel's right to protect her citizens. H.Res. 951 places blame for the rockets squarely on Hamas and Islamic Jihad and their benefactors, Iran and Syria. It also calls on Egypt to do more to stop weapons and explosives smuggling into Gaza.

In the coming days, Israel will make the difficult decisions and establish the necessary priorities to defend her civilians against the indiscriminate rocket fire coming from the terrorist stronghold of Gaza. The United States has a chance to stand with Israel by passing H. Res. 951. We should encourage our leaders to support this bill. ■

Never Say *Dai*

V'ham'lachah ha'y'tah dayam “*Their efforts had been more than enough*” (Exodus 36:7)

In our *parashah*, B'nei Yisrael – all of the men, women and children – are asked to contribute to the building of the *mishkan*. The people voluntarily give fabric, building materials, architectural expertise and money. It was not enough for Betzalel to build this holy building. Ramban teaches us that “even the foreman (*nagid*) is to be praised for his announcement to the people to stop donating for they had no more use for extra gold and silver.”

B'nei Yisrael rose to the challenge and exceeded expectations. The people were excited to take part in the building of God's footstool. They recognized the sacred nature of the task and wanted to be involved. So successful was the raising of donations that the artisans had to tell Moshe *dai kevar*. In our time, saying *dai* is not a luxury we can enjoy and we must be prepared to continue contributing.

While the U.S.-Israel relationship owes its strength to mutual interests and common values, it is not inevitable and cannot be taken for granted. The President has requested \$2.55 billion in security assistance for Israel as part of its fiscal 2009 budget. The request marks the first year of a \$30 billion 10-year agreement between the United States and Israel to gradually increase U.S. security assistance to the Jewish state to help it face increasing threats, including a potential nuclear Iran, daily Hamas rocket attacks, Syria's military build-up and the rearming of Hizballah. Under the agreement signed in August 2007, the \$2.55 billion request will gradually increase until 2013, when it will level off at \$3.1 billion per year until 2018.

In modern times, Israel is the *mishkan* of the Jewish people. A strong relationship between the U.S. and Israel is critical to the preservation of this *mishkan* as well as for the benefit of American interests. Working together with our elected officials, we can strengthen and deepen the relationship between these two countries. ■

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