



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 17, 2014

Parashat Vayakhel

Gathering for Learning

And Moses gathered (Exodus 35:1)

ויקהל משה (שמות לה:א)

Moses gathered the entire nation together—men, women and children—not only to teach them the laws of Shabbat and to instruct them to construct the Tabernacle, but to set an example for the future. Yalkut Shimoni (Exodus chapter 35, 408) notes that throughout history, subsequent sages followed Moses' example and gathered masses of people in order to teach them. "Said the Holy One [to Moses], make great gatherings and teach before them in public the laws of Shabbat, so that they will learn from you in future generations to gather communities on each Shabbat to teach and instruct Israel in the ways of the Torah."

From our earliest moments as a nation, we gathered together to learn and study. Recently, the President of Israel used a new technology to teach thousands of Israeli students, and broke a world record in the process.

Earlier this month, using advanced technology developed by Cisco, Israeli President Shimon Peres broke a world record by delivering the largest online civics class in the world, [Haaretz](#) reported. Speaking to more than 9,000 Israeli high school students in 215 classrooms in 71 schools across Israel from Cisco's Israeli headquarters, Peres' civics lesson emphasized the values of equal rights, freedom of expression, and democracy. In his lecture, which was viewed by observant and secular Jews, Arabs (including Bedouins) and Christians, Peres stressed that computerizing education will help ensure broad and equal high quality education for students throughout the country. On hand for the event, Marco Frigatti, Senior Vice President of Guinness World Records, certified the results and noted that the event was unique for its combination of civics, technology, and a unique personality who had lived through the entirety of Israel's short history. Frigatti also pointed out that Peres now holds two world records. In addition to the record for giving the largest class ever, he is also, at age 91, the oldest head of state in the world.

Moses set the example of mass learning that Jewish teachers have emulated throughout our history. Recently, the President of Israel followed in Moses' footsteps, using technology to gather and teach students from across Israel. ■

A Force for Unity

All the congregation of the children of Israel (Exodus 35:1)

כל עדת בני ישראל (שמות לה:א)

Why did Moses specifically gather "the entire community of Israel" when instructing them to construct the Tabernacle? Rabbi Yehoshua Wizman explains that the act of gathering can serve to either divide or to unite. When a specific faction wished to construct an idol to replace Moses, we read that "the people gathered themselves against Aaron" (Exodus 32:1) in order to coerce him to build the Golden Calf. That gathering ultimately divided the nation and caused great damage. For this reason, Moses gathered "all the congregation of the children of Israel" to unite the entire community around the great mission of constructing a house of God within the Jewish camp.

Moses recognized the power of building the Tabernacle to unite the Jewish nation. Today, advocacy for Israel serves a similar purpose, uniting Jews from across the religious spectrum and Americans from both major political parties.

Within the Jewish community, various groups often disagree with each-other about a host of critical issues. Yet, they are able to overlook those differences and stand united in their efforts to support a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. Those efforts stem from a strong desire to protect, defend and support the Jewish people and Jewish homeland, as well as a sense of identity with and support for the only democratic state in the Middle East. In addition, the issue of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship serves as a force for unity within the broader American community as well, enjoying critical support from both Democrats and Republican across the United States. For more than 60 years, bipartisan support for Israel has been a hallmark of Congress. Even during periods of partisan divisions in Washington and frequent fluctuations between peace and violence in the Middle East, Congress has been a bastion of bipartisan support for Israel. And, for the past half-century, both major parties' platforms have featured strong planks affirming the value of the U.S.-Israel relationship. American presidents and lawmakers from both parties built and strengthened the U.S.-Israel bond, because Americans have understood that solid relations between the United States and Israel are rooted in the shared value of democracy and the other moral principles of Western civilization. Polls have repeatedly indicated that more than two-thirds of Americans hold a favorable view of Israel, and Americans across a wide range of demographic groups strongly identify with the Jewish state.

Moses recognized that working together to build the Tabernacle would serve to unite the entire Jewish nation. Today, support for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship serves as a powerful unifying force in the Jewish community and throughout the United States. ■

Actions of Leaders

And the rulers brought (Exodus 35:27)

והנשאים הביאו (שמות לה:כז)

Rashi (on 35:27) notes that the word *nesi'im* appears in a truncated form (נשאים instead of נשיאים). Rashi explains that this unusual spelling served as a rebuke for the rulers' failure to act. According to the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:19) when Moses called for donations for the construction of the Tabernacle, these leaders decided to wait until after the nation had given to contribute themselves. In that way, they could make up whatever shortfall existed. To their surprise, the people gave enough—and more, leaving the leaders nothing to give. “Because they were originally lazy,” Rashi writes, their title is missing a letter.

The Torah rebukes the leaders for their failure to act and contribute in a timely manner. Today, the same can be said for the world leaders who are failing to act to avert a humanitarian disaster in Syria.

According to [The Washington Post](#), President Obama recently acknowledged that “diplomacy, the main pillar of its Syria policy, is failing even as civil war is destroying the country...” Moreover the President said that, “Negotiations between the Syrian government and parts of the opposition are ‘far from achieving’ a peaceful end to the conflict.” While Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. [called](#) the war, which has killed more than 110,000 and displaced millions, an “apocalyptic disaster,” negotiators are talking past one another and cannot even agree on what the main goal of the talks should be. “The beginning of this week is as laborious as it was the first week,” Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. envoy for Syria, said in Geneva. “We are not making much progress.” At the same time, as the diplomatic efforts in Geneva are hopelessly stalled, parallel efforts in the United Nations in New York aimed at providing humanitarian relief to the victims of the war seemed similarly stymied. [The New York Times](#) reported that a meeting on a draft resolution that would force all parties in the bloody conflict to allow access for humanitarian organizations fell apart when representatives from Russia and China failed to show up, United Nations Security Council diplomats said.

Like the princes of the tribes in the desert who failed to take action, diplomats both in New York and Geneva are also failing to take action to avert the humanitarian crisis in Syria. ■

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