

MARCH 16, 2015

Parashat Vayikra - Hachodesh

A Universal Ethic

When any man of you brings an offering (Leviticus 1:2)

אדם כי יקריב מכם (ויקרא א:ב)

Last July, over 120 people from six different countries [gathered for three days in Nazareth with one goal](#): To transform a concept into a working prototype of a device or product that would ease and improve the lives of people living with disabilities. This new movement, called [TOM](#) (Tikkun Olam Makeathon) represents a global community of makers that want to make the world a better place. This past week, from March 17- 19, the third TOM event, [TOM:TLV](#) focused on creating ways for people living with disabilities to integrate better in their communities. Makers worked together to create products that help individual integrate into communities, find a job, sit with friends in a cafe, or simply stroll the streets. The TOM movement represents and reflects a deep-seated desire to not only help Jews or citizens of Israel, but to repair the entire world – a desire rooted in ancient Jewish tradition.

The Temple in Jerusalem was never an exclusively Jewish institution. Rather, it was always intended to serve as a universal source of spirituality for all of mankind. The Torah enshrines this universal ethic in the very language introducing the offerings in the Tabernacle. “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When any man (*odom*) of you brings an offering...” (1:2) Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that the word *odom* (“any man”) carries a universal connotation. He writes: “The very first world of the Mosaic laws of the Temple gives the Temple the most universal mission, and with this one word expressed that which came to be a prophetic proclamation through the mouth of Isaiah: “I shall bring them (the children of the other nations) to the Mount of My Sanctuary, I shall make them happy in My House of Prayer...for My House will be called a House of Prayer for all the nations.” (Isaiah 55:7)

Today, even without a Temple, the people of Israel continue this universal ideal of repairing the world, working to improve the lives of others around the globe. While we cannot offer the nations the ability to bring offerings in the Temple, we can and do offer ways to help people with disabilities, wherever in the world they live. ■

Coercing Them into Saying “I am Willing”

According to his will (Leviticus 1:3)

לרצונו (ויקרא א:ג)

To achieve atonement for certain sins, one was required to bring an offering in the Temple. The verse states that the offering had to be, “according to his will” (1:3) – it must be given willfully. What if a sinner refuses to bring the offering? What if he just doesn’t want to do it? Rashi (on verse 3) explains that we coerce him. “[The verse] teaches us that we force him (to fulfill his obligation). I might infer that they do so against his will, (therefore) Scripture states [that it must be done] ‘according to his will.’ How is this possible? They force him until he says, ‘I am willing.’”

Rashi’s description of coercion directly mirrors the efforts of the international community to rid the world of Iran’s dangerous nuclear weapons program. As diplomatic efforts require the backing of harsh, stinging sanctions, the international community must exert enough economic pressure until Iran complies and willingly agrees to shut down its efforts to build a nuclear weapon. This is why [Congressional efforts to pass additional sanctions now](#) are so important. Backed by the threat of additional sanctions, diplomats at the negotiating table will be able to coerce Iran to finally respond to the demand that it shut down its nuclear weapons program by saying, “I am willing”. ■

Anti-Semitism and Hatred of Israel – Parashat Hachodesh

This month shall be to you (Exodus 12:2)

החודש הזה לכם (שמות יב:ב)

“It seemed like routine business for the student council at the University of California, Los Angeles: confirming the nomination of Rachel Beyda, a second-year economics major who wants to be a lawyer someday, to the council’s Judicial Board, until it came time for questions. ‘Given that you are a Jewish student and very active in the Jewish community,’ Fabienne Roth, a member of the Undergraduate Students Association Council, began, looking at Ms. Beyda at the other end of the room, ‘how do you see yourself being able to maintain an unbiased view?’ For the next 40 minutes, after Ms. Beyda was dispatched from the room, the council tangled in a debate about whether her faith and affiliation with Jewish organizations, including her sorority and Hillel, meant she would be biased in dealing with sensitive governance questions that come before the board, which is the campus equivalent of the Supreme Court.” At first glance, we can hardly believe that this scene, described in agonizing detail in the [New York Times](#), took place in California in 2015, rather than early 20th century France or Germany. Yet, upon further reflection, while jarring, events such as these should not shock us, because they’ve been happening for years, not as blatant anti-Semitism, but under the guise of anti-Israel activism.

Parashat Hachodesh, at face value serves as a reminder that Passover is just around the corner. Eliyahu Kitov (Book of Our Heritage vol.2 p. 118) writes, “this reading...reminded [the people] of the approach of Pesach, so that they could make preparations for the pilgrimage.” In ancient times this meant tending to ritual purity and preparation for a journey to Jerusalem. Today it means rounds of shopping, cleaning, and preparing for the Seder. But this section also carries significance for another reason: it represents the first explicit commandment in the Torah. Up to this point, the entire biblical text engaged in narrative: Creation, the Deluge, the lives and sojourns of our forefathers, the Exodus. If Judaism is rooted in commandments, why does the Bible devote so much space to what are, essentially, stories?

The Midrash (see Yalkut Shimoni Bo 12) explains that the biblical narrative represents much more than stories. Rather, it establishes the history and heritage of the Jewish people. “Said Rabbi Yitzchak: In was only necessary for the Torah to begin with ‘This month shall be to you...’ Why did it begin with Genesis? ‘He has declared to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.’ (Psalms 111:6)” Our forefathers represent our national identity. The Exodus represents the birth of the Jewish nation; we are not simply a collective connected through commandments, but a people with a common heritage, history – and homeland. Rashi, in his first comment on the Torah (on Genesis 1:1) makes a direct connection between Jewish identity and anti-Israel sentiment, noting that this heritage, so powerfully described in the biblical text, also connects us with the Land of Israel and serves as a proof to our connection to the land, “If the nations of the world should say to Israel, ‘You are robbers, because you have seized by force the lands of the seven nations...’”

Following the terrorist attack at a Jewish grocery which left four Parisian Jews dead, Jeffrey Goldberg of the Atlantic traveled to Paris to speak with French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who [drew a direct connection](#) between anti-Israel activities and anti-Semitism, “There is a new anti-Semitism in France... This new anti-Semitism comes from the difficult neighborhoods, from immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa, who have turned anger about Gaza into something very dangerous. Israel and Palestine are just a pretext. There is something far more profound taking place now. It is legitimate to criticize the politics of Israel. This criticism exists in Israel itself. But this is not what we are talking about in France. This is radical criticism of the very existence of Israel, which is anti-Semitic. There is an incontestable link between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Behind anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.” Rashi, who lived in France eight centuries ago, warned of the same anti-Semitism masked as righteous indignation for Israel that we see in France today, and that we’re watching develop on campuses across America.

Reading Parashat Hachodesh, we remember that in just two weeks, on the night of the Seder, we will once again renew our connection with our nation’s story and the birth of our people. But we will also remember the efforts of Pharaoh and Laban to persecute the Jewish people, and the vitriol burning in their ideological descendants who use hatred of Israel to mask their anti-Semitism beneath the veneer of acceptable public discourse. ■