



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 22, 2016

Parashat Ki Tisa

Show Up and Be Counted

Then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul (Exodus 30:12) ונתנו איש כפר נפשו (שמות ל:יב)

Woody Allen famously quipped, “Eighty percent of life is just showing up.” How right he is. The small percentage of people who actually do “show up” have a greater influence and impact in life, whether we’re talking about our personal lives, our professional lives or the community at large. The people who “show up” really do make a difference.

The opening section of Parashat Ki Tisa strongly reinforces this notion through the counting of the nation using the half-shekel. Moses is instructed that, “This they shall give, every one that passes among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary...” (30:13) At first glance, Moses institutes a simple census. Yet, rather than count each person individually, every person was required to give a half-shekel donation to the Tabernacle. These half-shekels were then counted to reach a final count of the people. A more careful look reveals that Moses’ census differs fundamentally from most others—including the United States census. In America, the government appoints representatives and tasks them with the responsibility of counting the citizens of the United States. The people don’t really have to do anything. They remain passive as they are counted. The half-shekel count requires active participation. One must give in order to be counted. Rabbi Shmuel Goldin in his book *Unlocking the Torah Text* (vol. 2) notes that the half-shekel reminds us that we must earn our affiliation, and that a Jew must take definite action in order to be counted as part of the community. He writes, “In order to be counted as a member of the Jewish community, you must actively do something that ‘counts.’”

With the beginning of the primary season this month, the U.S. presidential election is now in full swing. Races for Congress will soon heat up as the country prepares for the most contested and unusual voting in recent memory. These elections represent an important opportunity for supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship to back the candidates of their choice—on both sides of the aisle—specifically when the candidates need us most, in the run-up to the election. This support, both in time and resources, are the building blocks of the relationships critical to strong backing for Israel in the halls of Congress.

This support will not happen if we don’t get out there, show up, and do the hard work for the candidates of our choice. It won’t happen if we don’t pick up the phone to call our elected representatives, and remind them of the importance of speaking out in support of Israel. And it won’t happen if we don’t make the investment to travel to Washington and demonstrate in person that a strong U.S.-Israel relationship has broad, bipartisan support from citizens across the United States. The half-shekel count reminds us that all of us are responsible for the future of Israel and the Jewish people. ■

Direct Communication

Face to Face (Exodus 33:11)

פנים אל פנים (שמות לג:יא)

In places of conflict like Israel, discord often emanates from a failure to know the person “on the other side.” Becoming acquainted with people from different groups can have a powerful impact on a conflict and significantly reduce tensions. Recently an Israeli start-up film company wondered what would happen if you brought a group of women from vastly different backgrounds together and recorded their interactions. Their series of short films, called “[One Table](#),” features six women—Jewish and Palestinian, religious and secular—who sit down together to eat, talk and share their views. While only one episode is currently available, the very idea—sitting down together to talk—sends a powerful, critical message: there will only be peace when we sit down, talk and come to appreciate and understand one-another.

In *Ki Tisa*, we read how Moses was the only human being who maintained a face-to-face relationship with God. After two forty-day periods of communion with God on Mount Sinai, Moses had developed a level of closeness and intimacy with God unique in human history. But, how could Moses speak “face-to-face” with an ephemeral God who by definition has no form? Maimonides (*Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 7:6) explains that the phrase isn’t meant to be taken literally. Rather, the phrase “face-to-face” describes the intimacy and closeness of the relationship. While all other prophets spoke through an intermediary or through visions, Moses was different. He spoke to God, “As a man speaks to his fellow man,” (Exodus 33:11), and was able to speak with God without difficulty or distress, “just as a person is not awe-struck from hearing his friend’s words.” Rabbi Ofir Cohen derives from Maimonides’ teaching the importance of direct communication, “We see that that desired form of communication between people is ‘face-to-face.’ Just by looking at [two people communicating directly] we can see their relationship, and the level of closeness between them.”

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his famous work *Da’at Tevunot* (154) takes this idea one step further and writes: “It is a matter of nature that two friends who turn to each other in love and friendship turn their faces towards each-other, and that demonstrates the closeness between them. But in the case of two who are distant from one-another, one turns his face in one direction and the other in the second direction, for [showing one’s] face demonstrates openness, while turning away demonstrates distance.” When we meet with someone face-to-face, we express our willingness and a desire to grow closer together. Conversely, refusal to meet in person, face to face, represents an expressed desire not to grow close—to remain distant and preclude the possibility of any true relationship.

For years Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed not only a desire to meet directly with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, but a willingness to meet “anytime and anyplace” to negotiate a lasting peace agreement. “I am prepared to immediately—immediately—resume direct peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority without any preconditions whatsoever,” Netanyahu said in his speech last fall to the United Nations General Assembly. Yet, Israel has consistently been rebuffed. Perhaps most troubling of all was the recent declaration at a press conference in Japan by Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki that “We [the Palestinians] will never go back and sit again in a direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.”

Time and again, the Jewish state has demonstrated its willingness to make tough sacrifices for peace. In 1979, Israel withdrew its forces and uprooted Jewish settlers in the Sinai Peninsula to achieve peace with Egypt. In 1994, Israel signed a comprehensive peace treaty with Jordan. Each agreement was the result of difficult, but direct, negotiations that allowed the parties to express their differences while learning to appreciate and understand each-other. As was the case in the previous Arab-Israeli peace deals, only direct talks between the parties can lead to a real and lasting peace. The Palestinians’ refusal to meet “face to face” represents a truly disturbing development to those hopeful for a peaceful solution to this ongoing dispute. Peace won’t come from third-party negotiations forced upon Israel. It cannot come when the Palestinians refuse to even sit together at the negotiating table. It will only be possible when the PA is willing to meet “face-to-face” with Israel, and come to a lasting agreement with the Jewish state. ■