



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 29, 2016

Parashat Vayakhel - Shekalim

An Assembly to Support the Jewish State - Vayakhel

And Moses assembled all the congregation (Exodus 35:1)

ויקהל משה את כל עדת (שמות לה:א)

A synagogue rabbi who regularly leads delegations to AIPAC's yearly policy conference in Washington, D.C. explains that, "For me Policy Conference is nothing short of a religious experience. To be in a conference room with thousands of others, Jews and non-Jews alike, people of all backgrounds and races, united by our passion, love and loyalty to Israel and the American-Israeli relationship, is something that gives me goosebumps. To hear our elected leaders—all of whom feel a responsibility to show up at AIPAC; to hear a diverse view of opinions; to hear the relationship of Israel and...every topic there—is something that is invigorating, inspiring, educational and is something which is spiritual." That's the power of an assembly that gathers together for a holy purpose.

This power of assembly plays a critical role throughout Parashat Vayakhel, beginning with the very first verse in which Moses gathers the entire nation to convey the commandment to construct the Tabernacle. For most other commandments, Moses relayed his instructions to the people through a hierarchy of sages and teachers. He would teach a selected few, who would then convey the mitzvah to the nation. Yet, for this critical project, Moses understood the importance and power of community and the combined effort and energy that it can generate. Commenting on this phenomenon in our parashah, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, Executive Director of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism (IMPJ), writes that, "the Torah was careful to describe the work of the construction of the Tabernacle as the work of a team; through collective energy and the combined handiwork of all ranks from within the nation: Moses and the princes, Bezalel and Oholiab, the craftsman and professionals and their staffs, and the masses of men and women that offered donations and participated in the actual work. Numerous phrases testify to the combination of *nedivut lev* ('generosity of heart') and *chachmat lev* ('wisdom of the heart') that formed the basis for the joint effort."

We intuitively recognize the power a group joined together for a holy purpose can have. We use it in our own community, and we join with others to promote critical values that drive us. In just a few weeks, March 20-22, supporters of Israel from across the United States will gather together in Washington, D.C., for the annual AIPAC Policy Conference. Thousands of participants, from students to seniors, of all political persuasions will come together as a *kahal*—a community—dedicated to strengthening and maintaining the relationship between the United States and Israel.

Commenting on the power of community, Rabbi Kariv writes, "The strength of a community is based on combining the forces of visionary leadership, talented artisans with professional skills and a significant backbone of community members who participate in the work, contribute to it and enrich it." Policy Conference follows this model. Members of our diverse pro-Israel community assemble to support the state of Israel, combining strong, visionary leadership, a devoted group of professionals and the critical backbone of men and women like us who offer our time and resources to learn, share and advocate on behalf of the Jewish state. The energy is palpable, and participants who come to learn and lobby, return home energized with a new sense of passion and vigor. Join with us this year, and follow in the footsteps of the Children of Israel in the desert, who assembled together to build a structure that brought sanctity, light and holiness to the world. ■

Funding Basic Needs – Parashat Shekalim

This they shall give (Exodus 30:13)

זה יתנו (שמות ל:יג)

The Mishnah (Megillah 3:4) teaches us that on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar we read Parashat Shekalim—the six verses (Exodus 30:11-16) that outline the collection of the half-shekel from each and every citizen, funds that were then designated for the communal sacrifices in the Temple. Why do we read about the collection now? The Talmud (Megillah 29b) explains: “Said Rabbi Tabi in the name of Rabbi Yoshia: [as it is written] ‘This is the burnt-offering of every new moon throughout the months of the year’ (Numbers 28:14). Says the Torah: Renew and bring the offering from a new collection. And since in [the month of] Nissan we must bring [the sacrifices] from a new collection, a month earlier we read [about the collection] on the first of Adar, so that [the people] would bring their *Shekalim* to the Temple.” Essentially, the fiscal year in the Temple era began with the month of Nissan, when the priests would purchase necessary supplies from the new collection. In order to collect the necessary funds from the nation, the Sages instituted the reading of Parashat Shekalim to remind the people to send their half-shekel to the Temple. By preparing in advance, the leadership ensured that the needed funds were in place by the new year, and avoided any possible shortfall in funding.

Commenting on the words *v'natnu*—“and they shall give”—the Gaon of Vilna noted that the word in Hebrew (ונתנו) is a palindrome, reading the same both forward and backwards. According to Simcha Raz (See *Shivim Panim L'torah*, Vol. 2 p. 209), this teaches us that “it is possible that the giver will one day need others to give to him—for [monetary need] is a wheel that returns to its source.” Yet, the backwards-forwards nature of the word carries another meaning, sometimes the giver receives as much as she gives. In simple terms, giving makes us better, more generous people. Other times we actually do get a real return from helping others. Nowhere is this truer than America’s assistance to Israel.

The United States has long defined Israel’s safety and security as important to its own national interests. Accordingly, America provides Israel with annual security assistance which helps the Middle East’s only democracy defend itself—by itself—against mounting threats. The United States is currently negotiating a new ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Israel to succeed the current MOU, which expires in September 2018. This new agreement will seek to outline America’s security commitments to the Jewish state for the coming decade.

As we advocate on behalf of America’s continued security assistance to Israel, it is important to remember that this assistance also serves the interests of the United States in three important ways. First and foremost, American assistance provides stability in the most volatile region in the world. In an increasingly uncertain Middle East, Israel is the one stable democratic ally upon which America can consistently depend. Cooperation between the two countries in intelligence, homeland security, missile defense and counterterrorism has helped the United States meet its growing security challenges, and U.S. support for Israel helps deter regional conflict by making clear to potential foes that they cannot defeat the Jewish state. Secondly, fully seventy-five percent of security assistance provided to Israel is spent in the United States, spending that boosts the U.S. defense industry and helps support thousands of high-quality American jobs across the country. Finally, American support spurs Israeli innovation which furthers American security interests around the globe. Israel has pioneered cutting edge technologies in cyber weapons, unmanned vehicles, sensors and electronic warfare systems, and advanced defenses for military vehicles. In addition, Israeli battlefield medical technologies have saved countless American lives. The innovative use of U.S. military equipment by the IDF, coupled with shared know-how, has helped the U.S. military improve its own equipment and tactics.

As the Gaon of Vilna pointed out, giving can be a two-way street, bringing benefits back to the giver. As we read Parashat Shekalim and remember the call for funds for the Temple, we also must support the call for continued American support for a safe, strong Israeli partner. ■