

MARCH 20, 2017

Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei, Hachodesh

The Critical Role of Women Then and Now - Vayakhel-Pekudei

And all the women (Exodus 35:26)

וכל הנשים (שמות לה:כו)

Six months ago, Microsoft appointed Shelly Landsman as the head of the Microsoft Israel, where she leads over 1,600 employees. According to the Israeli [Globes news service](#), an important emphasis that Landsman brings with her to the job is promoting women: “It’s important for Microsoft to have equal representation of men and women,” she says, citing numbers, “In my management now, 74% are women. That’s my deliberate intent. Diversity is important in an enterprise, so that its thinking won’t be dyed-in-the-wool. In order to do this, you need young and older people, men and women, religious and non-religious. You need it to create an enterprise culture that generates different thinking.” What Landsman has instituted in Microsoft in Israel has not only been a core value of Israeli society for decades—the inclusion of women was also fundamental to the construction of the Tabernacle in the desert.

When Moses, in Parashat Vayakhel, calls upon the nation to donate the necessary materials for construction, the text notes, “And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands and brought that which they had spun, the blue, and the purple, the scarlet, and the fine linen; And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun the goats’ hair.” (35:25-26) The text describes the women as people “whose hearts stirred them up in wisdom...” How is spinning thread connected to wisdom of the heart—and specifically women’s hearts? Tamar Odenberg, an attorney for [Yad L’Isha](#), a women’s advocacy group in Israel, [explains](#) that spinning reflects an innate female quality that only the women could bring to the Tabernacle: “The essence of the wisdom of women is in creating threads that are meant to connect between two or more things. The wisdom of the work of spinning utilizes the connection of different threads as a path to build the House of God...Our parashah deals with the construction of the House of God which is also the construction of each woman’s personal house which, in her wisdom, she weaves the family frame and connects between the different parts of the family...This wisdom is an inner wisdom of the heart—what we today call emotional intelligence, with which women are blessed...” Rather than preventing women from taking part in the work of the Tabernacle, Moses understood and appreciated that without their unique vision, intelligence and contribution, the men would never be able to properly build a House of God on their own.

The unique role and critical contribution of women has been a fundamental value of Israeli society almost since the creation of the Jewish state. Just three years after the country’s founding, the Knesset passed the Women’s Equal Rights Law, guaranteeing equal protection under the law and providing the legal basis for gender equality in all spheres of life. Today women serve in key roles throughout the Israeli political system, and have held posts including chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the Knesset and the permanent representative to the United Nations. The IDF assigns 1,500 women to combat positions annually, and women and men have equal rights to serve in any role in the IDF. These public sector values enter into the private sector as well, where women play a fundamental role in Israel’s “start-up nation” success story. Israel has the highest female entrepreneurship rate in the world, and women hold more than 30 percent of managerial positions in Israel’s top 100 companies, amongst the highest ratio in the world.

Today, Israel has emerged as a leader in promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women—carefully balancing diverse religious sensitivities with strong support for universal rights—all of which is unprecedented in the Middle East. Following in the footsteps of their ancestors in the desert, Israeli women of all faiths serve as leaders in

government, the military, business and civil society, skillfully weaving the threads of the country together as agents of change, peace and prosperity. ■

Ready at Any Time – Parashat Hachodesh

And you shall eat it in haste (Exodus 12:11)

ואכלתם אתו בהפזון (שמות יב:יא)

Earlier this month, the armed wing of a Fatah splinter group called Fatah al-Intifadah [fired yet another rocket](#) towards Israel from Gaza. While the rocket never actually traversed the Gaza border fence and alert sirens in Israel were not triggered in the incident as the rockets did not threaten a populated Israeli area, this attack served as a reminder of Israel's southern residents living life on the edge, waiting for the next attack. Can we imagine what it would be like if rockets threatened not just Israel's southern and northern regions—as they do now—but the entire population of the Jewish State, including the major population centers of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv? Such a scenario isn't difficult to conjure, because fifty years ago, that was what life was like in Israel. No matter where you lived, you had to be ready at any time—living under the constant threat of fire from hostile regimes bent on Israel's destruction.

On the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the month in which Passover falls, we read the special section from Exodus Chapter 12 called *Parashat Hachodesh*. In this passage we read about the establishment of the Jewish calendar as well as the commandment given to Moses instructing the Israelites in Egypt to prepare the Paschal lamb, which they were instructed to eat during the actual night of Passover. It would have been reasonable to assume that as this meal represents the slaves' first free meal they would be commanded to eat the lamb slowly and deliberately, as kings—just as we, today, sit at our modern Seder table. Yet, during the very first Seder in history, the Israelite slaves are commanded to eat in precisely the opposite manner: “And thus shall you eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord's Passover.” (12:11) Rashi (on verse 12) explains that the Israelites were commanded to eat “in a hurried, confused manner.” Although they were forbidden to leave their homes for the duration of the night, they nonetheless ate “in haste,” ready to leave at a moment's notice. Traditionally, we read *Parashat Hachodesh* on this Shabbat as a reminder of the coming Passover holiday, encouraging us to begin the involved process of preparing our homes for Passover. Yet, the reading also reminds us of the Jews' state of mind; their sense of urgency and confusion; not really knowing whether and when they would have to leave their homes forever at a moment's notice.

In less than three months, Jews around the world will join with Israel in marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Six Day War and the miraculous reunification of Jerusalem in June of 1967. While we prefer to recall the great military victory and assume that Israel always enjoyed the strength we know today, the reality fifty years ago, was that Israelis lived in a constant state of anxiety, confusion and danger. Five Arab nations refused to recognize the Jewish state and were committed to wiping it off the map. Egypt amassed troops along its border with Israel, and forced the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping force stationed in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Syria terrorized northern Israeli farms and towns, shelling them from strategic positions on the Golan Heights. Frequent Arab terrorist raids kept Israeli citizens in constant fear. At its narrowest point, the Jewish state was only nine miles wide, meaning that a successful attack could have divided the country in minutes. In addition, Jordanian forces dominated Israel's skyline, threatening the major population centers in the Gush Dan region.

Today we take great pride in the fact that the hard work of a great many American friends of Israel has given the people of Israel a sense of safety from external existential threats. As we read of the anxiety and confusion of the Israelites on the night of Passover, let us recommit ourselves to working to ensure that the Jewish people never again endure nights of fear, confusion and anxiety. Backed by the strength of the United States, Israel can, and must, always have the means to defend itself—by itself—from the very real threats that it faces, giving the citizens of the Jewish State the peace and tranquility that they so richly deserve. ■

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