

Vayakhel-Pekudei: The Importance of Faith Communities

In February, my husband, adult son and I treated ourselves to a Broadway musical. None of us had been the theater on Broadway in a very long time and we chose a show that each of us had been wanting to see for a very long time – The Book of Mormon.

We were well prepared for the hilarity and the irreverence and the show did not disappoint. Yes, we loved it. What I was not prepared for, and what nobody seems to talk about, were the very important messages not-so-hidden within this satirical story of Mormon missionaries in Uganda.

In a nutshell, the protagonists are young Mormon missionaries whose dreams of being sent to a fabulous place to proselytize are shattered when they are sent to a remote town in Uganda. There, the existing group of missionaries have horribly failed in their mission. The Ugandans are living in fear of a cruel dictator. They are plagued with disease. Their women are subject to rape. They live in squalor. They have a fun, Hakuna Matata like theme song called Hasa Diga Eebowai, which we learn mean f--- g-d.

Largely by making things up as he went along, one of our protagonists manages to pull the community out of the gutter and instill in them a deep belief in and love for G-d, together with feelings of hope and faith, all through communal prayer and learning.

So what does any of this have to do with our Torah portion? I'll tell you.

In our three previous Parshiot, G-d describes to Moses in intricate detail the schemata for the building of the Tabernacle and the Altar within it. In Ki Tisa, the Israelites rebel since Moses has spent so much time on the mountain. They are without their leader and they believe that they are without their G-d. They want a new god, one that they can see, having yet to have grasped the concept that G-d and Moses are separate entities. Led by Aaron, they build a golden calf. Moses hears singing as he comes down the mountain. Is it the Israelites' version of Hasa Diga Eebowai?

We all know what happens next. Moses and G-d are both angry. Moses breaks the tablets. Punishments are imposed. Moses goes back up the mountain and appeals to G-d's sense of compassion and forgiveness. Moses returns with two new tablets. Which brings us to today's Parsha.

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - Moses assembled the entire Israelite community. Exodus 35:1. He begins to speak the words that G-d has commanded from the mountain, most of which concern the construction and decoration of the Tabernacle and Altar. The very first commandment, however, concerns the observance of the Sabbath as a holy day of rest, devoted to G-d. Now, G-d had indeed commanded Moses to so instruct the people but, why, I wondered, was this important when the main objective was to give the particulars for construction of the Tabernacle? What came to me was this --- The work to be performed was that of a FAITH COMMUNITY. This was NOT a Habitat-For-Humanity project. This was not a field trip to a remote village to rebuild their infrastructure. This was the construction of G-d's home among

the people. A G-d who we could not see or touch but whose presence we could nonetheless feel. A G-d who would live among us so long as our faith held strong.

And so began the very first Capital Campaign, with every member of the community contributing of their wealth and skills. The Tabernacle was built as a true Community effort, each member taking pride in its construction for his or her own contribution. Each working six days and resting on the seventh. And with that, a true Faith Community was born in the desert, coming together to worship a faceless, nameless G-d whose presence could nevertheless be felt because of that Community. Members working together, supporting each other toward accomplishing their common goal. The end result – spiritual health, growth and awakening.

Today, through circumstances beyond our control, we don't have the luxury of being able to physically access our community. Our spiritual leaders, however, are mindful of the importance of faith communities in keeping our lives G-d centered. Kudos to Rabbi Hammerman for his herculean efforts to retain that connectedness, both through daily emails/Facebook posts, and virtual gatherings.

Let us not take our wonderful faith community for granted. Each of us contributes to it based upon our unique abilities, gifts or skills whether it be it through financial contributions, material contributions, volunteerism, or participation. Maintaining the spiritual health of our community is the ultimate goal. We must all keep that in mind, whether we have a physical home or a virtual home.

כִּי עָנָן יְהוָה עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹמָם וְאֵשׁ תִּהְיֶה לְלֵילָה בּוֹ לְעֵינֵי כָל־בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל־מַסְעֵיהֶם: For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the LORD rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.
Exodus 40:38