

PARSHAT PEKUDE
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The portion of Pekude which concludes the reading of the Book of Shmot is really a reiteration of the portion of Titzaveh. We have a description of the clothing of the High Priest and towards the end of the Torah portion a method of consecrating the vessels of the Tabernacle and the installation of the Priests. While some of the description is only interesting to an interior designer and a clothing manufacturer meaningful lessons can be extrapolated from the text.

One of the key elements of the clothing was the ephod, a garment that the High Priest, Aaron, wore over his tunic and robe. It extended from below the rib cage to the ground and was similar to an apron. Over it, on his chest, Aaron wore a breastplate of judgment, a Hoshen Mishpat. On it were twelve stones, each of them bearing a name of a tribe of Israel. The Torah tells us: “The stones corresponded to the names of the sons of Israel: twelve, corresponding to their names; engraved-like seals, each with its name for the twelve tribes.”

Thus, the High Priest each time he would come before God and wear the priestly vestments would carry upon his heart the names of all of the tribes of Israel. According to the commentators, this symbolized the presence of all Israel in the decisions of the High Priest and in the prayers that he offered. It was hoped that both the High Priest and God would always be mindful of the people and bring them good tidings and blessings.

I just returned from a five-week stay in the State of Israel as part of my sabbatical time away from the Congregation. It was, needless to say, a very interesting time to be in Israel. While most of you read newspapers, scanned the internet or saw reports on television, I could say that I was in the neighborhood for many of the events that have occurred and are still occurring in the Middle East. As a participant in the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations meetings only two weeks ago we heard from military analysts, political pundits, politicians and policy strategists concerning events in the surrounding countries and their possible effect on Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested that we currently living in a time of shifting sands which will have enormous impact not only upon Israel and the Middle East, but upon the West and perhaps the entire globe. No one, either on that side of the Atlantic or on this side, expected what happened in Tunisia and Egypt in the fashion in which changes occurred. While it is easy to be a Monday morning quarterback and suggest that people had expected the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, there is no one who anticipated that changes would occur at such a pace that is simply still mind-boggling.

As we listened to all the analysis it was clear that it is very difficult to prognosticate what will occur in the next few weeks and months. Sitting in Jerusalem and watching live Mubarak’s speech to his people suggesting that he was ready to give up his rule in Egypt if it was done in a peaceful manner of succession and then watching the next day as he boarded a helicopter and flew away to his resort in Sharm-el-Sheikh

made the news very real and close at hand. In truth, while Egypt and Israel have had a cold peace, Mubarak has lived up to the peace treaty signed by Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat which has been a cornerstone of Israeli foreign policy. Now without knowing what will eventually happen with the leadership of Egypt, Israel's political and military establishment is watching very carefully what may occur over the next few months.

Natan Sharansky, the Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel, informed us that he believes that there are currently two drivers in the world: a desire for freedom and for strong identity. He is of the opinion that peace is ultimately made between peoples and especially those in democratic regimes. Thus, he is hopeful that Israel and Egypt will continue to have peaceful relations and maybe even build upon them. On the other hand, not everyone agrees with his assessment and concern for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood among other potential leaders in Egypt brings a sense of instability to the region and concern for the future. What we realized is that we are really living in a new world. The social networks have changed everything and when history will be written about the shifting sands in Tunisia, Egypt and now Libya, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain and even Iran, the internet, Facebook, cellular phones and instant communication among people will have been seen as contributors to the downfall of tyrants.

Most of the analysts suggested this is was a popular revolt based upon issues of poverty, a search for personal freedom, in particular, by young people who wanted to express themselves in a non-violent fashion. There were statements made during our meetings in Jerusalem that suggest that Al Jazeera based in Qatar now controls the Arab world. The pictures that are seen, the images that are transmitted are quickly placed on You-Tube videos and I-Phones and transmitted from one person to the next instantaneously. These new methods of communication helped young people gather together and herald a message of the need to change the current political realities. Whether this will be for the better, only time will tell.

While all this was happening there continues to be concern about Iran. Speaker after speaker warned us that the West must take seriously Iran's threat not only to Israel, but to the entire Middle East and perhaps all the Western world. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman announced in our meeting of the impending passage of two Iranian warships through the Suez Canal. This has now occurred and they are now in Syria. While the West talks a good game almost every single military analyst suggested that we need to be stronger in standing up to Iran and to its threat of domination of the entire Middle East. Even the Arab countries in the region are beginning to sense the threat to their people.

On the Israel-Palestinian front there is no movement at all and after a day trip to Bethlehem to listen to Palestinians give their side of the story, I am not optimistic about a quick resolution to this conflict. With Lebanon in the north falling under the influence of Hizbullah, Jordan experiencing some political turmoil and Syria creating alliances with Iran, Israel is now worried about its neighbors. With Turkey changing its policy from favorable to the West to currying favor with Iran and even Syria, a chief ally of Israel is

no longer the good friend that it used to be and NATO itself must be wary of this change of policy. With Apartheid week on college campuses, stressing disengagement from Israel, and the delegitimization of Israel campaign, there is concern about support for Israel from the younger generation in Europe and in North America. Yet, Israelis go about their normal activities and are still optimistic about the future. After all, this is the start-up nation which has more companies on the Nasdaq than any other country besides the United States. This is the country that continues to bring new immigrants to its shores, including new Tunisian families who are concerned about their future in their home country. This is the country whose economy remained strong even during the economic upheaval in the United States and Asia. And, this is the country where new inventions are simply taken as commonplace in everyday activities.

Each day I listened to the Israeli Hebrew news at 6:00 a.m., followed reports on the internet and watched CNN and BBC report from the neighboring countries. And then like Israelis, each day I would go about my regular activities studying, attending meetings, walking the streets of Jerusalem and, in the most fortunate moments, playing with my grandchildren and enjoying this wonderful stage of life.

Israel itself has many internal problems ranging from social and economic gaps in society to questions of religion and state; from concerns about education in its schools to an electoral system which simply doesn't work. Yet, people still sit in the cafes, shop in the supermarkets, visit with their families and experience the beauty of life and the magnificence of the scenery in the Holy Land.

The story is told that the Bata Shoe Company sent two representatives to Africa to check out a potential market on that continent. The pessimist returned and said it was terrible, no one is wearing any shoes and, thus, there was no market for their products. The optimist returned and said the exact opposite. It is a terrific market, he stated, and we have enormous potential. No one is wearing any shoes and we have the opportunity to capture the market and sell our products.

It is very easy to be pessimistic, especially with all of the events of the past few weeks, but that is not the Jewish nature. Instead, with many challenges ahead, there is an opportunity for real change. Perhaps the world will realize that the real problem is not Israel and the Palestinian negotiations, it is not settlements, but a nuclear threat from Iran. The Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan revolts had nothing to do with the State of Israel. It was an internal yearning for what President Shimon Peres stated was democracy and free self-expression. While we must be cautious about the future, we do not need to be so immobilized by fear that we lose all sense of proportion. We hope we can be like the optimist who understood that there are new opportunities to meet the challenges of the day and look towards a brighter future.

According to our Torah portion it was the High Priest who carried the names of the Children of Israel next to his heart. In the Bible the heart was considered the locus of various human functions, including memory. The High Priest was to recall at all times whom he represented and, at the same time, hope that God would bless his nation. Today

there is no high priesthood. Instead, according to the Book of Exodus, we are to be “A kingdom of Priest and a holy nation.” Thus, all of us wear upon our hearts the names of the Children of Israel, the tribes to whom we belong, the people which stands proud and strong in the State of Israel and throughout the world. It is thus our responsibility to remember from whence we have come and to plan, work and be prepared to sacrifice for the future of our people. Israelis will prepare for all eventualities. We must do so as well through our political, financial and spiritual power. We must continue our support in the coming weeks and months as we learn what all these shifting sands will mean.

As we conclude the Book of Shmot we will stand and recite the Hebrew words: “Let us be strong, let us be strong, and let us strengthen one another.” Let us take these words to heart as we pray for a bright future for our people and work for that eventuality.