

**PARSHAT PEKUDEI  
SHABBAT SHEKALIM  
MARCH 1, 2014  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

I have just returned from almost two weeks in Israel and would like to share my thoughts with you through the background of our parasha and the special Shabbat reading. As president of the American Zionist Movement I am a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The conference is composed of 51 member organizations who join together for the purpose of a consolidated approach to the American administration and the Israeli government on issues affecting the relationship between them as they concern the welfare of the Jewish people in Israel and around the world.

The motto of the organization is “Strength through Unity.” This is easily seen as appropriate through the four Chicago representatives who were present on the trip: James Klutznick is chairman of American Friends of Peace Now – a far left group; Joel Sprayragen is vice president of the Jewish Institute for Strategic Studies – a far right group; Rabbi Leonard Matanky is president of the Rabbinical Council of America – the Orthodox rabbinical organization; and while I represent AZM, I am, of course, a Conservative rabbi. That tells it all. We hold very different opinions but have a common cause – the welfare of the state of Israel and the Jewish people.

We met with Israel’s leaders throughout our four days in Israel: PM Netanyahu, FM Liberman, Defense Minister Ya’alon, IDF Chief of Staff Gantz, US Ambassador Shapiro, Justice Minister Livni, Finance Minister Lapid, Opposition leader Herzog, and President Shimon Peres among others. They expressed to us what are the issues that keep them up at night?

As one could expect Iran is a major issue. There is deep concern concerning the meetings in Geneva of the P5 plus 1. There is no trust in the Iranian regime, in its veracity, its willingness to carry out proper verification of its nuclear sites, its interest in dismantling what it has already built and the purposes behind the nuclear reactors and all that goes with them. Israel remains vigilant even as it gives the international community some time to attempt to push Iran to step down from nuclear capacity.

Syria: there is utter chaos on Israel’s northern border with over 130,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Assad had kept things quiet on that border even as he has remained in an axis with Iran and Hezbollah. The opposition now includes jihadists who have declared “first we get rid of Assad and then we get rid of Israel.” The current situation is very difficult and no one can predict where it will end up. The fighting may continue for some time with neither side gaining an upper hand. It is also a humanitarian disaster with refugees fleeing to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and beyond.

Many people have been taken to Israeli medical facilities for help. We heard from the civilian head of Israeli Flying Aid who informed us that quietly the group has brought food to refugees both in Jordan and in Syria. Not too long ago Israeli youth groups collected tons of

food to be distributed in Syria. It was simply the right thing to do no matter what the politics may be.

Lebanon: Hezbollah is deeply engaged in the Syrian conflict alongside Assad. Lebanon is again unstable and there is grave concern about missiles being transferred there. While Israel has not affirmed the latest strike or missiles being transferred across the Lebanese-Syrian border, it has not denied it either. The talk is not if there will be war, but when.

Egypt: Israel has hopes for stability and there is cause for cautious optimism. el-Sisi, now in control, is better for Israel than Morsi and there is close security coordination with the Israeli military. Sinai today is an area of chaos, but Israel is pleased that Egypt is reacting to terrorists and is also isolating Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The stability of Egypt and its close security cooperation with Israel is essential for a stable Middle East.

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations: Both sides are waiting for the Kerry proposal and there is a good deal of jockeying in the media. However, no one is talking publicly at this point. There is much skepticism, but there is a consensus in Israel that something must be done to make sure Israel remains Jewish and democratic. We traveled to see Rawabi, a newly constructed Palestinian city in the West Bank. It is a private endeavor financed by Qataris. There are plans for 23 neighborhoods and 40,000 people. It currently employs 3,000 Palestinian workers and the construction has made use of Israeli products. It is a very hopeful sign.

In short, as usual it is a challenging time not only for Israel but for the entire Middle East. Many of us are going to the AIPAC Policy Conference this week to show our support for Israel and its security needs. While there are difficulties in this complex situation, everyone remains hopeful. That hope is based on three items: Israel is a strong country and can and will take care of itself. We traveled to Rezifim army base and saw Israel's cyber warfare deterrents. Israel is developing new ways to protect itself and its citizens; The US-Israel relationship is strong especially in defense and security matters. Not everyone is pleased with current US policy, but all appreciate its great friendship; The greatest asset is the Jewish people. There is a need for close cooperation between those who live in Israel and those who live in the Diaspora. FM Liberman used his time with us to promote Jewish education in the Diaspora and the need for the Israeli government to assist in this endeavor. It is in the strategic interest of Israel, he said.

What is the message? Hazak Hazak v'NitChazek – Israel is strong, we must be strong and we must strengthen one another.

I spent my second week with the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency for Israel. I sit on the executive committee and serve as deputy chairman of the Russian speaking Jewry Committee. We are all concerned with what is happening in Ukraine. We opened our committee meeting with reports on the conditions there. We heard by telephone a report by a member of our staff living in Kiev who brought us up to date on the situation; we heard a learned discourse from a professor at Tel Aviv University giving us the context for the current civil unrest; and we listened to a Ma'ariv reporter who had just returned from Kiev. No one knows where this will end up.

The Jewish community is not united on how it sees the issues. There are Jews on both sides of the conflict. However, there is concern about security. We have received reports from rabbis who are anxious about their synagogues and their communities. Our own Masorti rabbi Reuven Stamov is concerned about his premises and his congregation as they are situated close to the central square where major fighting has occurred. I am pleased to report that both our own Federation and JAFI are sending funds to ensure the security of our people. JDC is helping those in need and JAFI is preparing for an emergency aliyah should it be necessary.

We take seriously the message of Shabbat Shekalim. According to the text, each Israelite gave half a shekel to the Tabernacle. Why only half? They needed another to make it whole. We are one community, one people. We need one another as we profess the phrase that “All Israel is responsible one for the other.”

The message of this Shabbat easily coincides with the messages of my trip. We are strong and must remain so, but only if we are united in purpose, mission and vision. We may not always agree one with the other on individual policies, but on the greater vision we must be of one mind and one heart - concern for the welfare of the State of Israel and the Jewish people wherever they may reside.

Tomorrow begins a new month and with it new possibilities. President Shimon Peres told us that our concern should not merely be about borders but about horizons. Borders can be touched and felt; horizons are envisioned and imagined. This is the task of the Jewish people, to imagine and work for the brighter future for all. Let us work for an era of peace for we can only imagine its benefits. May this new month and all succeeding months bring us many blessings.