

PARSHAT RE'EH
AUGUST 15, 2015
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

The most revolutionary law found in the Book of Deuteronomy that distinguishes it from all the other books of the Torah is the demand that there be only one sanctuary where the Lord may be worshipped through sacrifices. The Torah tells us in our Torah portion of this morning that Israel must worship G-d “only in the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribal territories.” While the place is not specified, it is clearly understood later to be the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

It seems that before the Book of Deuteronomy stressed this law that there was no central sanctuary where this law was enforced even after the Temple was established in Jerusalem. We know today from archeological evidence that sacrificial sanctuaries existed in different places around the land of Israel and only during the time of King Josiah, when the Book of Deuteronomy was found in the Temple precincts, was there an order of demolition of all those shrines.

Why is the Book of Deuteronomy so concerned with the central sanctuary? Why is the lesson reiterated over and over in Moses’ speeches to the children of Israel? Clearly this is a book that stresses the centrality of Jerusalem, the holy city and the sanctity of the Temple Mount. But there may be other reasons as well, some perhaps not as theological or ideological, that may teach us important lessons which can inform our activities today when worship in the Temple no longer occurs.

According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Torah strives to achieve two interconnected goals through the selection of a single site for worship: uniformity of religious practice and unity of the nation. While we can easily understand the concept of the uniformity of religious practice necessitating a central sanctuary, what does it mean to unify the nation and how does this central sanctuary do it? He points out that not only did G-d want the children of Israel to be devoted to the traditional laws they had received but he also suggests that the centralized worship “becomes the center point elevated above the nation and its individuals, drawing everything and everybody up to it, uniting everything and everybody in equal obligation to dutifulness, and effecting everything and everybody with equal responsibility.” In other words, according to Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, “not by coincidence, the Torah clearly and repeatedly connects the theme of centralized worship to the themes of national unity and social justice.”

With the children of Israel coming to Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices the law would not only enhance their religious duties but it would create a sense of peoplehood, an opportunity for the people to be together and experience a unity of purpose. Perhaps it is not surprising that in this very same portion we are told of the laws of the tithes whereby the children of Israel had to take care of the Levites as well as the poor. In addition to this, four times in the six-year cycle they had to bring their tithes to that one central sanctuary, to the holy city of Jerusalem. The Rashbam suggests that the reason for the tithes is that “when you see the place of the Shekhinah, with the priests at their service, the Levites offering song, and the representatives of the Israelites

at their stations, then you will understand the words of the Torah ‘so that you may learn to revere the Lord your G-d forever.’”

The tithing system and the central sanctuary reinforces the fact that we are one people, with one central place, with one central purpose. In this day and age no message could be more important for the Jewish people. No, we no longer have a central sanctuary, we can today offer our prayers anywhere around the globe. Yet, the concept of Jewish unity continues to be the needed focus of our people. So often issues pull us apart so that we concentrate on our differences rather than those principles that unite us. I remain convinced that there are more items that unite us than will ever divide us.

On the first day of Shavuot I raised with the Congregation the disturbing news that the Masorti Movement Bar and Bat Mitzvah program for handicapped children was not allowed to have their B’nai Mitzvah ceremony held in a Masorti synagogue in Rehovot, Israel. The Orthodox mayor had put too much pressure on the celebrants making it impossible for it to be housed in the synagogue. Once the news got out, there were many complaints coming from all over the Jewish world. The President of the State of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, invited them to use the presidential house as a place to celebrate the B’nai Mitzvah. Initially, he agreed to have a Masorti rabbi and an Orthodox rabbi officiate at the services. However, pressure was put upon him and he only allowed the Orthodox rabbi to officiate. A great clamor again was heard and made its way to highest levels of government and Israeli officialdom. Eventually, some of the children did have their B’nai Mitzvah in Rehovot. However, the celebration did not take place in a synagogue and it was officiated by an Orthodox rabbi. Subsequently, we have learned that there was a ceremony in Rehovot at the Masorti synagogue for a few of the participants.

President Reuven Rivlin has reached out to many minorities within Israeli society. In February, when I was a guest in his house along with other members of the Conference of Presidents, he had members of the Haredi community, as well as Israeli Arabs, speak to us to show his concern for Israelis who are in the minority. This latest decision, therefore, stuck in the craw of most of us and seemed to be out of character. Thankfully, the situation has been ameliorated.

On the eve of Tisha B’av a gathering was held in his residence with speakers that included a Masorti rabbi, Rabbi Chaya Rowen-Baker from Jerusalem, a Reform rabbi, Rabbi Meir Azari from Tel Aviv, Rabbi Benny Lau, an Orthodox rabbi from Jerusalem, and Dr. Motti Zeira of Oranim College. Each of them was asked to teach a lesson about the unity of the Jewish people. It was a very appropriate topic especially around the time of Tisha B’av when we recall the destruction of the second Temple which, according to the Talmud, was due to sinat hinam, idle hatred. President Rivlin introduced the panel and spoke of the unity of the Jewish people. It was a monumental moment in the State of Israel on behalf of diversity and pluralism and the cause of the unity of the Jewish people. Jerusalem once more stood as that central place where Jews of all backgrounds could gather. How refreshing, how exciting. Members of the worldwide Conservative Movement who previously had criticized the President, now praised him. He voiced the hope that this serve only as a beginning of a time which will bring Jews together in the State of Israel and, indeed, throughout the world.

There has been much discussion in the Jewish community concerning the Iran agreement established by the P5+1 and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many words have been spilled and much emotion has come forth. I personally have been involved in many telephone discussions and meetings and have been the recipient of much information on all sides of the issue. This is a very complicated issue on which good people can disagree. Name calling does not help, and ad hominem attacks are totally inappropriate. Yes, we are desperately worried about the State of Israel. Yes, Iran cannot be trusted not merely with nuclear arms, but with conventional arms as well. We have many concerns about verification, the ending of sanctions, Iranian behavior throughout the Middle East, and the trustworthiness of the Iranian regime. However, we must learn to talk rationally with one another and come to appropriate personal and communal conclusions. I believe good people can disagree on what is in the best interests of the United States and the State of Israel and I believe that civil discussion within the Jewish community is essential. There should be much time spent on this issue, for it effects not merely Israel but the United States and the entire western world. However, we must learn not to demonize the other for opinions that can be heartfelt and well thought out. We need to study the issues and not jump to conclusions. I have tried to do the same and, while I am still very skeptical of the agreement and its implications, I am ready to listen to other opinions. As we move towards the vote of the Congress, we know that the issue will only heat up. Let us keep our heads together, our words appropriate, and our conduct worthy of praise. We must be concerned not only about the run up to vote, but its aftermath as well.

Perhaps we should keep in mind the message of the central sanctuary. Not only it is to be a place of solidified religious practice, but its purpose is to bring people together, to recognize the strength of the community and their obligations to those less fortunate than themselves. I believe even the President of the State of Israel needed to learn that lesson and I think he has. In his address that evening, he stated: “We must remember and ensure the existence of unity, of the simple ‘love of Israel,’ within us, within the Jewish people. The communities represented and gathered here are communities which are brimming with the love of Israel, and with a deep commitment to the future of the Jewish people, and to the character of the State of Israel. One could disagree with the positions and opinions of the members of the Reform or Conservative Movements, but one could not deny their dedication, or the clear voice with which they speak, in support of the State of Israel here and around the world. One could debate with the Religious Zionist community, or with the Kibbutz Movement, but one could not deny the contribution of these movements to the building of the State of Israel, to its well-being and security.” He went on to state, and I think this is the major message of his talk, “We need to learn, not how to agree with each other, but how to disagree with each other – with respect, fairness, with firmness, and without foregoing the other person’s Jewish identity.”

We may not have a central sanctuary today, but we have returned to our land. We don’t make pilgrimage to the Temple precincts three times a year, as dictated in our Torah portion of today, and though we don’t give tithes to the Levites or to the poor any longer, it remains part of our Jewish ethic to care for them. Though times and circumstances have changed, I continue to believe that the lesson of Jewish unity and respect for others must be a central focus of Jewish life today. Let us find our own path to G-d while acknowledging other paths as well. And, if we disagree let us do so civilly, even as we work collectively to ensure the survival of the Jewish people and the State of Israel and shoulder our responsibility for their welfare.