

PARSHAT TERUMAH
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A week and a half ago while I was on a mission of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations in Jerusalem, we had an hour break between sessions. We were at the Inbal Hotel and most people went to their rooms to rest for a while, for it had been an exhausting experience of travel and meetings. Since I was not staying in the hotel and was in my apartment, I had an hour of free time. I decided to walk to the Old City of Jerusalem and to the Kotel. Standing at the Kotel transported me back to the ancient city of Jerusalem and Second Temple period. I could only envision what the Temple must have been in the political, ritual and spiritual life of the ancient Israelite. Standing where my ancestors stood some 2,000 years ago I offered some personal prayers and recited Psalms. In that hour of free time I had gone back in history 2,000 years. When I returned to the hotel I was again part of the mission experience of today's Israel.

The Temple was a reminder of the Tabernacle that the children of Israel had constructed in the desert and which is the main theme of this morning's Torah reading. G-d tells Moses to build the Tabernacle so that they "make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." The Tabernacle and its later rendition in the Temple experience was merely to be a physical symbol representing G-d's presence among the people. G-d was not simply to be found in that one habitation.

The Temple itself was destroyed twice. By the Roman period in which it stood for the second time, the children of Israel had created the synagogue as a place of assembly and prayer. Eventually, it also became the house of study. It is the synagogue today which carries on the tradition of the Tabernacle and of the Temple in which G-d's presence is felt among the children of Israel. Synagogues today possess the continuing challenge of representing both the past and the contemporary so that the Presence of G-d abides among the people.

I have just returned from a mission of the Conference of Presidents where we visited the cities of Marrakech, Fez, Rabat and Casablanca in Morocco, stopped for a day in Cairo, and had meetings in Jerusalem along with a day trip to Cyprus. In many of these places synagogue life was highlighted for me as local Jewish communities continued in their role as described in today's Parsha.

Morocco has somewhere between 3,000 to 3,500 Jews. The largest group lives in Casablanca, some 2,500. There are approximately 200 in Marrakech, 80-100 in Fez, and 150 in Rabat, the capital, with others spread throughout the provinces. Casablanca, in which we spent Shabbat, has 32 synagogues. They are all active and many of them have a morning minyan. And all are open on Shabbat. We visited synagogues in the Mellah, the Jewish quarter, some of which had been long abandoned and restored, and others which had been renewed in recent times. We spent Shabbat in a synagogue not too far from our hotel where we experienced a complete Moroccan Sephardic service as we were welcomed into their community. While the liturgy is a little bit different, the Nusach much different, the Torah tropes not like ours, and the

custom of having every word said out loud by individual leaders, is not what I am used to, I felt comfortable to have the Siddur in my hand offering almost the same prayers that we do here at Beth El each Shabbat morning and listening to the very same Torah portion you heard that Shabbat. In the synagogue I felt a sense of community with my fellow Jews around the world. They may have offered a prayer in Morocco for the welfare of their King, Mohammed VI, you may have offered a prayer for those who lead this country, but in both places we offered prayers for the welfare of the State of Israel and the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces. The commonalities far outweighed the differences. As we sat at Shabbat dinner and recited Kiddush, HaMotzi, and sang some Zemirot, there was no difference between the Jews of America and the Jews of Morocco.

Morocco is a moderate Arab country which has informal ties with the State of Israel and has been very welcoming to the Jewish community. Mohammed VI has issued a statement in which he has given equality to the Jewish community showing a great deal of respect for our traditions and customs. Many Jews, especially Israelis of Moroccan descent, come to visit the country and, in fact, a new charter airline route is just being inaugurated which, while officially stopping in Cyprus on the way to Morocco, is unofficially a direct flight between the countries. We had Kosher dinners wherever we went, met the Jewish community not only in Casablanca, but in Fez and in Marrakech, and spoke with both Moroccan and American officials. One of the highlights was a Kosher dinner prepared for us in the Palace of the King in Casablanca. The King himself was in Ghana for meetings, but he insisted that many of his ministers and advisors join us. I sat beside the Economic Advisor for the King. No one could ever remember the King opening his palace to this type of event.

The few hours that we had in Cairo were spent in the office of President Sisi. He made 90 minutes available for our delegation and spoke warmly of his relations with the State of Israel, his concern for security in the Sinai, his abiding interest in working together with the new American administration for security and well-being in the region, and his interest in creating a moderate religious tradition in his country which would express a sense of tolerance for all. In a remarkable show of friendship to us he not only took a group picture, but individually shook our hands as he wished us, and we wished him, well in the future.

In Israel the time was filled with meetings, ranging from those with the President of Israel to cabinet ministers, a visit to the foreign ministry, and listening to political and security analysts. We all know that Israel is in a dangerous neighborhood and the concerns about Syria, Iran, ISIS, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist organizations are high on the list of security concerns. And yet, Israel remains strong and confident that it can survive the challenges. The Prime Minister at that time was on a trip to Singapore and Australia, but the next week, during the meetings of the Jewish Agency and the Jerusalem think tank, the Jewish People's Policy Institute on which I sit, I had an opportunity to meet him in his office and to listen to him share his optimism for Israel's ability to meet the challenges of the day.

A one day trip to Cyprus allowed us to cement relations between the U.S., Cyprus, Israel, and Greece. There are both bilateral relations between Israel and Cyprus and trilateral relations between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus which have been centered on security and energy issues. We met with the President of Cyprus, its Foreign Minister, and had an opportunity to visit a

memorial where from 1946-1949 Jews who had attempted to enter Israel were interred by the British. Some 400 Jews died there while 2,200 babies were born on the island. Today it is memorialized with a plague, an ancient barracks, and the Israeli and Cypriot flags flying side-by-side.

Yes, there are Jews in Cyprus as well. Some 600 families in Larnaca, Nicosia, and even on the Turkish side of island. Yes, there too are synagogues and indeed a daily minyan. And yes, again, we had a Kosher meal together with the American Ambassador and the Greek Ambassador to Cyprus.

The Jewish community around the world continues to maintain its traditions and to appreciate its history. Based on the building of the Tabernacle, the centrality of the Temple, and the continuing importance of the synagogue, Rabbi Simon Greenberg has stated it is “the institution whose function it is to concretize here and now the concept of Knesset Yisrael. It is the Jewish people at their conceivable best.” The community gains strength from both being together and from the important messages of our tradition. Even in Modiin, where I went to synagogue with my family, I felt the very same strength as we listened to the Torah portion, offered prayers for the State of Israel and the soldiers of the IDF, and experienced a spiritual and contextual tie to Jewish communities around the world. Make no mistake about it, I believe the synagogue remains the central institution of the Jewish people around the world.

But, the synagogue as a building alone is not enough. The Talmud teaches us that should one build a synagogue or house of study, the structure should preferably have windows. Indeed, this idea is codified in law in the Shulkhan Arukh, the Code of Jewish Law. Some commentators suggest that the windows expose the sky, drawing our eyes to the heavens, allowing us to understand the vertical connection that we have with G-d. Others suggest that the light is set to capture us and draw us into the world, into the streets, to connect with G-d through daily living, to experience the horizontal plane in which we live with other human beings. Both axes, I believe, are central to the Jewish understanding of life. It is our task to remember that we are all created in the image of G-d and show our continuing respect for the transcendent. It gives us a sense of humility to recognize our place in the world and in creation. At the very same time, we are to be part of the world and to take G-d’s presence from the sanctuary into the streets. The Tabernacle, the Temple, the synagogue, do not alone contain G-d’s presence, it is the responsibility of the Israelites to recognize that G-d’s presence must dwell among them. In Morocco, Cyprus, Jerusalem, Modiin, Tel Aviv, and even in Cairo, I felt G-d’s presence among us as I joined my fellow Jews not only in prayer, but in our concern for one another, in our abiding interest of creating a safe diaspora and a secure homeland, and in our continuing fight for the survival of the Jewish people and for its welfare wherever we may reside.

There are indeed great challenges ahead of us in this country, where we have seen a spurt of anti-Semitism, in Jewish communities where they are distinct minorities like Morocco and Cyprus, and even in the State of Israel where we have our own land, a democratically elected government, and our own army. Yet, as always, I remain optimistic that we will survive the challenges and continue to thrive both in the Diaspora and in the State of Israel. All we need is to have faith in G-d and to profess that faith in our relations with Jews throughout the world and with humanity at large.

May we be privileged to live in an era where G-d's presence grows among us and the Jewish people is safe, secure, and thriving well into the future.