

PARSHAT VAYAKHEL
MARCH 5, 2016
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Two weeks ago, I was a participant on trips initiated by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Jewish Agency to the borders of the State of Israel. I stood on the Syrian border on the top of the Golan Heights where we were briefed by IDF spokespeople. The day before we arrived Russian-bombing sorties were present in the area. As we looked out all seemed to be calm and with the weather quite nice we could see for miles the terrain, villages, farms and cities. Our lecturer pointed out where the Syrian army was encamped, not too far from them were those opposing the Syrian government, and still further out were groups such as ISIS, El Nusra, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda. Syria is a country in chaos and it is all happening right next to the Israeli border. Quietly, Israel has opened the gates to the fence separating the two countries only a very short distance from us to allow some Syrian refugees to enter Israel for medical care and support. Israel, through private interventions, is also taking food and supplies across the border for those who need it.

A short time later I was standing on the Lebanese border in Kibbutz Misgav Am, looking out at Hezbollah encampments, Lebanese army installations, Christian and Druse villages. Right now Lebanon is quiet, but the leader of Hezbollah Nasrallah continues to issue dire warnings against Israel. The IDF spokesman answered my question as to whether Hezbollah being tied up in Syria is good or bad for the State of Israel. He told me that their fighters are gaining valuable war-time experience. The leadership does not care how many people are brought back in coffins, and one mistake on either side can trigger a hail of missiles raining down upon Israel proper.

A few days later, I was in Sderot and the surrounding kibbutzim. I had been there almost 18 months ago during Operation Protective Edge. The entire area is still under the threat of missiles from the Gaza Strip. Unfortunately, 18 months ago it was not simply a threat. Missiles and mortars were launched repeatedly from that area upon the Israeli civilian population.

Israel continues to live in a dangerous neighborhood. It is no longer called the Arab Spring, it is the cold winter. With Iran, Iraq, the so-called country of Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and not too far away Yemen and Libya, the entire region is in turmoil. Be it Russia or Saudi Arabia, Iran or Egypt, all are involved in these conflicts and Israel must fortify its borders hoping that the violence does not spread to Israel proper.

At the same time, Israel must be prepared for all eventualities. In the Negev desert we visited the army encampment Tzellim. There they have created a mock-up of an Arab village, a Kasbah, a Shuk, a Mosque for training Israeli army personnel. All the units, including reservists, go through this camp just in case they need to know how to act in urban warfare. I was there a few years ago and watched a live demonstration of a simulated battle. This time we were simply taken around and shown how young Israeli soldiers, 18 to 20 years old, when they open a door to a home must immediately decide whether there are terrorists inside or simply a family trying to protect themselves. These split second decisions mean the difference between life and death on both sides, as very often walls, appliances and packages contain explosive charges. This time,

unlike last time, there was some new construction. They have created simulated tunnels in which Israeli soldiers are now being trained based on what we know occurred in Gaza 18 months ago. Now tunnels are continuing to be built both there and perhaps in Lebanon as well.

While the State of Israel is a strong nation and its army is a first-class fighting unit, there are great dangers at this time. And that does not even take into account the lone-wolf attacks with knives, scissors, and axes on Israeli citizens and border police. These are random assaults, stirred on by incitement and almost impossible to stop. In order to show my solidarity, as minimal as it could be, I rode buses, walked into the Old City, visited the Kotel, and walked back through Ben Yehuda Street. I was not prepared for terrorists to dissuade me from visiting these very important places in my life. When I spoke to Bryna, though, that evening, she told me that she was pleased I told her what I had done after I got home.

Over and over again, as we listened to politicians, military and political analysts and social scientists, we were told that Israel was a strong nation both on the borders and within its society. At the same time, we were told Israel needs to rely not only on the strength of the United States of America, but on world Jewry. It is that latter support, they told us that is critical for Israel's survival over the long run.

In our Torah reading of this morning we have a recapitulation of the building of the Tabernacle and the construction of the vessels therein. The major vessel that Bezalel, the chief artisan, constructed was the Ark. He overlaid it with pure gold inside and out and he made a cover of pure gold over it. Then, according to the text: "He made two cherubim of gold; he made them of hammered work, two ends of the cover: one cherub at one end and the other cherub at the other end; he made the cherubim of one piece with the cover, and its two ends. The cherubim had their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They faced each other; the faces of the cherubim were turned toward the cover."

We have no pictures of these two enigmatic figures. Some pictures show the cherubim as angels, others as human beings, birds, children, male and female images, and a host of other forms. Some have surmised they are like a sphinx with an animal head. Still others suggest that they represent figures of the ancient Near East from Mesopotamia where they were used as intercessors or perhaps guardians.

Whatever they may have looked like, the question must be asked: What were they doing in the Tabernacle, on top of the Ark? In a religion which attempted to be mindful of any type of image, where any likeness of either the Divine or human could be seen as a transgression of the second commandment, why were the cherubim placed in such a prominent position over the Holy Ark? If we can picture the setting we might see the following image: Wings spread out, outstretched upwards and faces turned toward each other. While it is true the cherubim might have been of a spiritual nature, it is critical to realize that they faced one another and our tradition tells us that in facing one another they recognized the presence of the other. This symbolic act in this image is quite important.

Surveys and statistics show that the younger generation of Diaspora Jews is turning away from deep involvement with the State of Israel. They possess no historical context into which to

place the plight of the State of Israel. Somehow we must create the foundation for them to care for the future of the State and for its citizens. One of the ways to do so is to ensure that meetings take place between Israelis and those outside of the State of Israel so they can learn about one another and appreciate the connection between them. To the credit of Jewish communal and educational leaders through teen trips, and those a little later in life like Birthright and MASA, hundreds of thousands of young Jews are coming into contact with the country and their fellow Jews. They learn of the complexities of life there and that it is not as black and white as the media presents. They recognize that Israelis are just like them with human problems and challenges, as well as dreams, hopes, and wishes. These Mifgashim, meetings between them, are critical for the future development of Diaspora relations with the State of Israel.

We must create opportunities for our youth and those who have not been there yet, to visit the State of Israel. I commend the leadership of this congregation for establishing many years ago the Israel Scholarship program which highly subsidizes our high school youth who continue their Jewish education and then travel on peer trips to Israel. To the credit of the Orthodox Movement, a Gap Year program in Israel after high school is a regular occurrence. It is not as regular in the Conservative Movement and we must make it so. We must promote Israel travel so that we can interface with Israelis. Our congregation is now involved in a program through the Masorti Movement in Israel entitled the Rav Siach program subsidized by the Israeli government with Kehillat Netzach Yisrael in Ashkelon, for many years our sister Congregation in Israel. Every four to six weeks we are arranging Skype sessions between our members and theirs to get to know one another, to share common concerns and study material. We need to learn about them and they need to learn about us even as we are concerned about Israel's security situation. Israelis, too, must be sensitive to Jews in the Diaspora and learn about the predicaments in which we find ourselves in order to create relationships which are lasting.

These issues are not simple but they are critical not only for the survival of the Diaspora, but for the State of Israel as well. We were pleased to hear the details of the compromise at the Kotel and the recognition that it should be "one wall for one people." We were pleased to hear that Prime Minister Netanyahu has disavowed comments by members of his coalition government which are derogatory of Reform Judaism and its adherents. And we were pleased to hear from Israeli politicians across the spectrum expressing the common Jewish future in which we all find ourselves. But there is so much more to do both in Israel and the Diaspora to strengthen our bonds. We are ultimately tied one to the other.

Today is Shabbat Shekalim, the first of the four special portions as we prepare for the holidays of Purim and Pesach. In the giving of the half shekel we recognize that we can only be made whole if there is somebody else who gives the other half. We must be one united people to meet all of the great challenges that are before us. It is difficult to know what the next few months will bring to the State of Israel, but I am convinced that being an optimist is simply part of the DNA of the Jewish people, and that we have a bright future ahead of us.

I have come back from Israel somewhat concerned with the situation, but more convinced than ever that we need to work towards a peaceful and secure Israel, a thriving Jewish community in the Diaspora, and a world in which our children and grandchildren and great

grandchildren will see our dreams and our hopes fulfilled. This morning as we offer a blessing for a new month, I pray that it shall speedily come in our own day.