

Sermon Parashat B'midbar 5766
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This past Tuesday I watched a press conference on television with President Bush and the Prime Minister of Israel. Though what they said was important, I was really struck by the flags that stood behind them – both of the flags were held in stands and in the hands of the armed forces. I too, wear a similar flag on my lapel. Words cannot describe the meaning of this small pin as it exhibits the critical and inseparable commitment of our two homes and what they mean to each other. This brings me to a story I shared in a *Bulletin* article a few months ago.

A short time ago, Har Zion hosted two regions of the United Synagogue Youth as they prepared for the USY International Convention in Philadelphia. 100 of the 1200 USYers came to spend Shabbat with us before they made their way to the downtown Marriott Hotel for a week of fun and learning. Friday night we had the opportunity to *daven* together. In the midst of my D'var Torah, I made mention of a new phenomenon in America, the purchase of a third home. (New York Times, Friday, December 23, 2005) Just like the automobile, television and telephone, no longer is one or possibly two homes enough, now a third is requisite.

As is the nature of most of my Friday night D'verei Torah, I usually plug Shabbos at some point. Building towards that theme I suggested we too have three homes – first, the home in which we live; second, our congregation where we live spiritually; and third, Shabbat. As Heschel suggests, “Shabbat is the great cathedral in time and it is there we reside once a week.” As I set the congregation up for Shabbat as our vacation home, the group of USYers - engaged as they always are - yelled out, “our third home is Israel.” Though my answer of Shabbat was an esoteric, abstract idea, their statement was far more significant. Conservative Judaism can claim another success. **Our youth gets it!** Through conventions, classes, and summer trips we have taught our youth that Israel is our homeland.

So you see, all of that uncompromised commitment, loyalty, connection and identification is summed up in these two flags waving side by side. There is something powerful in watching the President walk side by side with the Prime minister of Israel while both the America and Israeli flags are lifted in triumphant partnership. So many ideals and values are held within those two flags. They represent freedom, equality,

human rights, independence and belonging. Such big ideas all housed in a symbol. Symbols are powerful. Symbols motivate and concretize feelings. Symbols make the abstract real. And so we must remember, there are people all over the world who desire the very things our flag represents.

Though made of cloth and thread, flags tell stories that are commanding and influential. This week's parasha draws our attention to an age-old symbol of the flag while in the face of challenge. When the text teaches, "*Ish al diglo...yahanu b'nai yisrael.*" "Every person gathered around their flag," the Torah is essentially saying we must rally behind the flag, not just as a symbol, but also around the ideas it represents. This is why Ibn Ezra takes such care in explaining what each flag looked like. When Ibn Ezra tells us the flag of Judah shows a lion as its symbol, he was explaining that the core value and identity of the tribe of Judah was strength and dominance. This value was necessary for a nomadic tribe trying to forge its survival in the hostile environment of the desert, ultimately a land to be conquered.

When Ibn Ezra describes the flag of Reuven, which carries the image of a man harvesting, it represents our need to remain closely connected to the land. Or Ephraim, whose flag bears the image of an ox, trying to convey the message of hard work. These flags motivate, rally and inspire us to be part of something bigger than ourselves. Ibn Ezra knew this and tried to inspire us to the same.

Flags inspire us to gather behind a cause. They are symbols of ideals we believe in - symbols which remain alive as long as our flags can be seen. Every time I sing the national anthem and get to the following sentence,

“And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride. I imagine the battlefield, with soldiers who look to the flag for inspiration. It is that same flag we see in every civic institution and displayed so mightily on this most important weekend, Memorial Day Weekend. Memorial day is one of the greatest of all our symbols because it is on this day we remember those who sacrificed their lives in defense of our country.

This flag, the American flag, is the same flag that is presented to every family of a veteran who served our country with pride and devotion. It is the same flag we see outside cemeteries in recognition of those who devoted themselves to the cause that is America. This weekend is a weekend of great pride. Pride for all we have accomplished as a nation while being associated with those who have made the greatest sacrifices of all. Memorial Day is best summed up in the flag. *Symbols are powerful. Symbols motivate and concretize feelings. Symbols make the abstract real. There are people the world over who desire the very things our flag represents.*

This morning's reading indicates that every tribe had its own flag, just as every State in our Union has its own. This doesn't mean we are separate entities; we are just individuals with common and often overlapping values. The genius of Moses' leadership came in his military prowess and understanding that this unformed group of tribes must form a tribal league in order to insure the survival of the whole. Each stood behind its own flag in a formation that protected not only themselves but each other - and we must do the same.

Some families have a coat of arms or a family crest and if you are lucky enough to have one of these, it is something in which you should take great pride - and I'm sure you do. It is worn in such a way as to let others know what is important to your family. Really, we all need to do it and we need to wear it on our sleeves.

This is why the Jew places a mezuzah on their doorpost. It let's everyone know that the values of this home center on God, Torah and Jewish people. The Mezuzah reminds us that everything which comes in and goes out of that home will be inline with those values. This is also why we wear tefillin on our arms and between our eyes. It makes the statement that the way I view the world and the things I do with my hands reflect the values I hold to be sacred.

We need to decide what values are at the core of our identity and then we must give expression to them. We need to put them out there and make them clear to those around us, to our children and to our friends, because you see, we can't expect that they just know how we feel or what is important to us.

This is why it was so important for the President and the Prime Minister of Israel to stand side by side in front of the world media. It was important for the president to say clearly, “Israel is a close friend and ally of the United States, and in the event of any attack on Israel, the United States will come to Israel's aid. The United States is strongly committed, and I'm strongly committed, to the security of Israel as a vibrant, Jewish state.” Or equally critical when he said: “ Hamas needs to make a strategic choice for peace. The United States and the international community have made clear that Hamas must recognize Israel's right to exist, it must abandon terror and accept all previous agreements between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. No country can be expected to make peace with those who deny its right to exist - and then use terror to attack its population.”

This brings me to another story. When my children came home this week from the Federal Reserve, they came with shredded money. I was concerned. Why? TITLE 18 Chapter 17 Section 331 of the Criminal code makes it very clear that it is illegal to destroy American currency. This is a small fact of which I had a vague recollection. However, it turns out that it's legal for the Federal Reserve to take currency out of circulation, destroy it and then give it to children and I know my children were intrigued by it. Still, it made me think about the fact that it is a crime to destroy money, but not our flag.

At first blush it seems as though we are saying our money is more valuable than our ideals. If currency is symbolic of material possession and social position, and the American flag stands for democracy - a value we hold at the very core of our identity – are we in any way suggesting the former is more important than the latter? Is capitalism the core value not the value of each individual? I would suggest that many people all over the world, the very people who are burning our flag, believe we think that money is more important than people. Therefore, we must make it expressly clear that we value people over money.

In this week's reading it states, “You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites,” we are reminded of *pidyon haben*, - when a father buys his first born back from the priest and makes the declaration *et bini ha bichori ani rotzeh yoter* - that I want my child more than this money. Symbols are shorthand to the big ideas. Symbols house values.

Symbols are powerful. Symbols motivate and concretize feelings. Symbols make the abstract real. There are people the world over who desire the very things our flag represents. That is why we should not permit the

burning of the American flag. Don't get me wrong, freedom of expression is a critical value - but we must find a better way to express our disappointment in the execution of our values. A child required to wear a uniform to school is forced to express his distinctiveness in ways more healthy than through clothing. So too, if we want to protest our governments action we must find a constructive way to do it. Burning our flag has become the trademark of terrorists and we must not permit it. Symbols are stationary rituals. Both are sacred and both must be protected and cared for. Symbols motivate and rituals empower.

Bruno Bettelheim (Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of fairy Tales, Handsworth, Penguin, 1978) explains that there are 345 versions of the story of Cinderella. All of these variations have distinct facets and different perceptions of the same event. Each of us attaches meaning to the symbols in our lives and attach meaning we must. Once we attach meaning we must explain it and preserve it. It is just not enough to hang out our flags and have a barbeque this weekend; we must talk about the meaning of Memorial Day and what it symbolizes for our country.

On this Memorial day weekend I pray you enjoy family, remember those who are no longer here - those who died in service to our country - and I pray you appreciate this great country. God bless you and God bless America.

Shabbat Shalom