

Sermon Parashat Va-yakhel 5766

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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

My mother loves to have all of her boys together. She loves just being around us and who could blame her as we are very entertaining. It is for that same reason I prefer to stay away. Whenever we get together we behave as we did when we were kids and I am beyond that. I have matured. I am more sophisticated. I have complex ideas and I care about big issues. When we get together I only minimally recognize the person I have become or who I once was. I can debate the state of affairs in Israel and I can speak to globalization, but when I am with my brothers all we can find to talk about is who has more hair and who is the fastest. In fact, the last time we were all together, we had to have a race to settle it. The results of that race were very telling I threw out my back, my older brother hurt his foot, my youngest brother pulled his hamstring and my oldest brother got a cramp, leaving my middle brother the victor by default and it was only a fifty yard dash. Of course, if it's not a race it's a basketball game but it's always some sort of competition.

I still can't figure out why my mother keeps pushing us to get together. I know when we were children she couldn't wait until we were out of the house and now all she wants to do is get us back together. What's the point? Look, I love my brothers but I like them most when they are in their own homes and I am in mine. We do our best when we are in our own worlds and with our own friends, so I just don't understand why she keeps encouraging us to spend time with each other. I can't imagine any of us walking away with our egos in tact. It takes me weeks to recover and not just physically. Once again she is trying to get us all together and as it turns out none of my brothers are able to come. In fact, my brother who lives in NY isn't even going to be there. Mom was just trying to orchestrate another family reunion. When I asked her what was she thinking she said something profound. We all find a way to get together for tragic events and if there was a death we would all get there. If someone was terribly ill we would find a way to be together. So why not get together for something happy or just for the sake of being together.

Just this week I went to pay a shiva call to a member of the shul. During our time together they remarked that their father would have loved to be in attendance at his own shiva because he would have loved to see everyone. They weren't saying this in any remorseful way, there was no reason to feel regret. They were simply remarking how much he loved his family and friends and how much he enjoyed being around them.

Sometimes we must come together with reason and purpose. Sometimes we must come together in happiness and sometimes we must come together in sadness. Sometimes we must, out of obligation, come together and sometimes we really want to be there. Today I want to tell you *we must* come together. Today I ask you to join me and come together to stand for something only our collective voice can effect. Today I ask you to step up and add your voice to mine as together we speak for those who's voices cannot be heard.

Last week I attended a rabbi's rally in New York to raise awareness of the atrocities taking place in the Sudan. Rabbi Rozenwasser and I joined with 150 other rabbis to learn and to be heard. We came together because our conscience demands it and our sacred law requires it. Today, I ask you to join with me as we move forward with initiatives which will prevent another holocaust and in all probability save lives. I ask you to stand with me as our conscience demands it and our sacred law requires it.

The opening words of this week's reading are Vayakhel - and the people assembled. This week they assemble for the observance of Shabbat. They were brought together in modern parlance to build a Shabbos community. This week the purpose of coming together is for the holiness of Shabbat. It is the same word that was used a week ago when the same people assembled to build the golden calf (Exodus 32:1). However, this week's reading has a different focus. Last week the focus was for sin, while this week it is for the betterment of humanity by generating a sacred space and a holy place where God and humanity can live in harmony.

I reject the opinion of the "Eretz Hemdah", who writes that the Golden Calf experience was one of divisiveness and disillusionment. It was just the opposite. The moment of the Golden Calf was an electrifying event. It is precisely that energy, that passion and that fire which was at the

core of the experience. This week my father made a powerful comment while we were discussing the parsha. He suggests that time and time again the text of the Torah draws our attention to the fire. In the most extraordinary moment, as Aaron is trying to explain to Moses the Golden Calf and how it happened, Aaron says *Vahlicheihu ba'eish vayetze ha'egel hazeh*. (Exodus 32:24) He says, "I took their gold and threw it into the fire and a calf came out." As if to say, I was just trying to dispose of their gold and look what happened. How naïve does he think Moses is? Does he expect Moses and the rest of us to believe that poor excuse. I had nothing to do with it. It was just an angry mob? I was just an innocent bystander. I saw what was happening but I was ill equipped to stop it. It was a force greater than myself.

This week fire becomes the focus once again. It is introduced for the first time within our text on Shabbat. When we are given the gift of Shabbat, just like last week, the only guideline given is that we must refrain from work. Nothing at all is said about fire. Mysteriously, again this week on Shabbat, the prohibition centers on avoidance of the use of fire. The passage seems to be making the comment that when you gather as a people, when the crowds converge, there will be an energy, a fire that will naturally exist. However, you must learn how to use it. Many of you have been to concerts. There is an energy there. So many hearts beating together produce a force. We have all heard stories of the terrible things that can happen when that crowd is worked into a frenzy. This week's reading reminds us we must learn how to use that fire.

The Rashbi, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in the Zohar , (The 50th Gate) a Kabbalistic work, speaks of the *orot shel tohu* and the *keilim shel tikkun*, the light of chaos and the vessel of repair. He explains that in the universe there is an energy, a light, and there are objects that direct that light towards the correction of the world. There are forces that provide for anarchy and there are forces that house that same energy and channel it toward the good, much like a laser that takes light and functions as a conduit toward a specific function. Light scattered into space has no value, light directed can produce healing and correction.

This weeks reading implies that gathering together is important, more than important, it is critical to our survival. However, that gathering must have a purpose, it must have intention and it must be directed and that is why our congregation of nearly 1200 families is a force. It is why we

have the ability to do things other communities can't, but we must be attentive, we must be directed and we must be pointed in the right course.

When all the people were standing together at the foot of Mt. Sinai it was a galvanizing moment. A few weeks ago in Washington, while sitting together with 6,000 Jews in support of Israel, there was a moment of powerful unity. So let's not minimize the force of coming together. Let's remember what we can accomplish when we come together. A generation ago we came together to march on Washington D.C. in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union - and the iron curtain came down. When we join together there is power and we ought not minimize it.

Today I ask you to join me in doing at least one of the following three things:

- Join Larry Kaplan on the Har Zion bus to the National Mall in Washington, DC April 30th. The bus will leave at 10:00AM and return at 7:00PM.
- Go to million voices for Darfur.org and fill out a post card to President Bush urging him to keep the commitment he made during his first year in the White House when he wrote in the margins of a report on the Rwandan genocide, "**Not on my watch.**"
- And finally, the Pennsylvania Public School Employees' Retirement System currently invests over \$2 billion in 33 companies - while Pennsylvania State Employees Retirement System invests \$1 billion in 29 companies - therefore, I have asked Rabbi Rozenwasser to spearhead our own initiative to engage our legislators in a discussion about divestment of Pennsylvanian State Pension funds to the Sudan.

Coming together on a Shabbat afternoon is important. Coming together to rekindle friendships and family connections is critical to our own personal survival. We need to feed off the positive energy that those we love exude. There is nothing I enjoy more than sitting around the kitchen table for dinner and hearing the cackle that is our family dinner every night. I love to watch my children's faces as they vie for attention. The same is true of our congregational family. There is nothing I enjoy more than the Friday night dinners that bring us together around celebration or study, around our children or around our Men's club and Sisterhood. That is what shul is all

about, but it must not stop there. The synagogue must be a place where people come to replenish their much depleted selves and then return to the real world to make a difference. Today, I call on you to make a difference.

Shabbat Shalom.

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