

## Vayakhel D'var Torah

Shabbat Shalom. This week's parsha is Parshat Vayakhel. Vayakhel involves the building of the Mishkan. In great detail, every item that will go into the Mishkan is described, with a list of each material needed for its construction. The Israelites come together, donating materials in order to help build the holy building. The people are actually so eager to donate that they provide too much, and Moshe must inform them that they can no longer give. God then appoints Betzalel and Ohaliav to build the Mishkan. The rest of the parsha is a detailed description of *every* aspect of *every* item going into the Mishkan and *exactly* how Betzalel builds it.

Betzalel is chosen by God to be the head craftsman for this project, in charge of building all aspects of the Mishkan. God commands Moshe to tell Betzalel to build the Mishkan first, but in relaying the commandment, Moshe tells Betzalel to build the ark first.

However, according to a Midrash, when receiving the message, Betzalel questions Moshe. Betzalel is confused about the order in which he must prepare the holy items. Shouldn't he build the structure that will hold the sacred vessels before the vessels themselves?

Moshe's thinking is that the Divine Presence of God is in the Torah, and the Torah is held in the Ark, so in order to honor God, a house for Him should be built first. However, Betzalel's reasoning is that the communal area needs to be built first, and only then can a home for God be built.

The way I understand this conflict is that Moshe is putting God before community, while Betzalel is putting community before God.

I see this as conflict between Jewish community and Jewish values. This conflict, reaching back all the way to Moshe, is still prominent in the modern Jewish community.

On the Chicagoland Jewish High School Senior Israel Experience this January, we spent a lot of time talking about contradictions and conflicts in Israel. The theory behind our Israel trip was not to *see* Israel, but to *experience* the real Israel. Out of the 33 seniors on the trip, 32 of us were

returning. So instead of going through Israel on a touristy level, we traveled the land trying to discover and understand the many complexities within.

For instance, our first morning in Israel was spent in Jerusalem. We went to the Dome of the Rock, the Kotel and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In those four short hours, we went to three of the holiest sites in the world. We visited the place of Mohammed's ascent, the closest we can get to where God's presence lived, and the place where Jesus was crucified. Each religion has a legitimate claim to Jerusalem, each conflicting with each other.

Another aspect of our trip was listening to speakers from all sides of the spectrum. It was in those speeches that the controversy between community and God arose.

Our second day in Jerusalem, one of our speakers was a representative of Shalom Achshav, Peace Now. Shalom Achshav is a non-governmental organization which educates and convinces Israeli voters to vote their agenda on solving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: mainly, peace with the Palestinians and Arab neighbors needs to be our number one priority. And in order to create and achieve that peace, we should and will exchange all necessary territories.

In the context of Vayakhel, Shalom Achshav is Betzalel. Shalom Achshav cares more about the global community and creating peace than the Jewish values, in this case, a Jewish homeland.

The next day, we traveled to Efrat, a settlement in the West Bank. There we met with Bob Lange, a leader in the community. After giving us a tour of the various schools, parks and beautiful views, Bob took us to a synagogue to share with us his personal philosophies. Bob explained to us that he is a settler because he believes that Israel is our Jewish homeland, promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by God. As Jews, it is our right and obligation to live in the land. His solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict is a one state solution, where a Jewish Israel stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, as described in the Bible.

It is obvious that Bob and his fellow settlers value God's commandments and values over communal peace, representing Moshe in our conflict.

These two speakers really showed us the complex and contradictory approaches to peace in Israel today. We saw that finding a solution will be very hard because even the Jewish people dispute over the best resolution.

Trying to give more importance to the Jewish community versus Jewish values from God is very complicated. Even more complicated is trying to merge or balance the two.

We visited two separate places in Israel that confirmed for me that community and values can be hard to balance.

The first was Kever Rachel, Rachel's Tomb. In order to visit her tomb, we needed to switch out of our Israeli tour-bus into a bus with no Hebrew on it and bullet proof windows. We drove through a twisting road to get to the entrance of the cave, encased by cement walls, which our history teacher told us were taller than the Berlin wall. The 10 minute bus drive through twisting security walls totally overwhelmed us all. None of us could concentrate on the holiness and sacredness of Rachel's tomb, we were too stunned by the security measures we had to take to get there. At Rachel's tomb, the Jewish values and religious aspect were overpowered by the measures taken for the safety of the community. We were unable to balance the two.

The second place we visited that tried to unite modern community and religion was a Halachic engineering company near the Green Line. The company specializes in engineering new ways to get around or bend Halachah, with a method they call "grama". "Grama" comes from the word "Li'grom" which means "to cause". They create machines which allow one to indirectly break Shabbat. However, even though the laws of Shabbat are not broken, the spirit of Shabbat is. I understand that the various machines are intended for the Charaidee Jews living in areas that are regularly attacked, yet won't use regular flashlights in their bomb shelters on Shabbat. It is a struggle for all types of religious Jews to merge Judaism and modern technology. However, I was very uncomfortable with the way they put modern community and Jewish values with each other.

The point I am trying to make is that in my opinion, it can be very difficult to balance Jewish community and Jewish religious values. As we see in the parsha, in the conflict between Moshe and Betzalel, community and religion cannot be equals, but it is our responsibility to get them as close as possible to each other.

My Israel trip taught us about trying to figure out our personal values. I thought about if I agree with giving up land for peace or settling more land, if I value a Jewish homeland or peace in the Middle East, and if I should be forced to choose.

I think that as modern diaspora Jews, we encounter the issue of community and religious values every day. A huge obstacle in our lives will always be trying to balance our Jewish community and our religious practices and beliefs in God. I cannot say which one is more important to me or to anyone else. It is an issue that I struggle with, as do Jews all over the world. With each situation, how we balance the values can change. However, I find it comforting that this is not just a modern issue, but an issue that has been facing the Jewish people before we even had Israel. God and community are both essential to Judaism, and it is our task to strive to find places for both in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom