

Parshat Matot-Masei
July 5, 2013/Tammuz 27 5773

Creating Light

Shabbat Shalom from the Shalom Hartman Institute in Yerushalayim! As part of my continuing professional development, I have been privileged to be selected to study in Jerusalem for the month of July at the Hartman Rabbinic Leadership Initiative, with 25 other pulpit rabbis from around the country. In addition to discussing contemporary issues confronting American Jewish communities, we are also focusing on Rabbi David Hartman's (*zichrono l'vracha*) philosophy, and I wanted to take this opportunity to share some Torah with you.

It's been several years since I have spent time in Israel. It seems to me, that Yerushalayim has undergone a transformation. Rechov Yaffo is now closed off to cars, and the new tram runs through the city. Egged buses are now green, not red. And the popular place to hang out has moved from Ben Yehudah to Emek Refaim. Part of me yearns for the old ways. I am not ready for a more "updated" and modern Jerusalem. And yet, Jerusalem is bustling with more building projects, more cafés, a diverse population, and is thriving because of human initiative.

It is human initiative that is key to the creation process. God created the world. Humans ensured that the world is habitable.

Rabbi Micah Goodman, on faculty at Hartman, suggests that the Written Torah and the Oral Torah begin in the exact same way, with one key difference.

At the beginning, "God separated between the light and the dark...and it was evening and it was morning, one day." (Bereishit 1:4-5).

Tractate Brachot, the first *mesechet* in the Oral Torah also begins with a discussion about light and dark, night and day. The second *mishna* asks: "From when may one recite the *Shema* in the morning? From when it is possible to distinguish between *techelet* and white." The day is defined by the moment that night turns into daylight. It is then that we can say the *Shema*. Rabbi Yehoshua, however, suggests that the way to determine when day begins is not by the first light, but rather "until three hours of the day," for this is when the sons of kings arise. In other words, morning is defined by the number of hours it takes for people to arise, and begin their day. When people wake up. In Bereishit, God determined the exact moment when night turns to day. In the Talmud, it is people who observe, determine, and declare how to define the morning. Humans create the parameters of the "day."

Both the Torah and the Talmud begin with the creation of light. But in the Torah, God created light, and ultimately the entire world. It is humans, however, who populate our world. Men and women must take God's laws, God's light, and put it to use. God created us with the ability to continue the creative process.

Our Torah portion also emphasizes and encourages human initiative. At the beginning of Parshat Matot, we read about the *nedarim*, the vows and oaths that an individual can take. A *neder* is a pledge to fulfill a promise, or as Rambam explains: an opportunity to prohibit him or herself to something that the Torah permits, or an opportunity to obligate oneself to bring an optional offering or to perform an optional mitzvah. (Nedarim 1:1-2)

The very nature of a *neder*, a vow, gives space for individuals to assert their own independence. This is the first time up until this point in the Torah that people themselves are able to create a *halachik* obligation—a new *halachik* status. Up until now, only God could designate which foods are kosher and which are not. However, by taking a vow, a *neder*, a person is effectively designating a kosher object forbidden to them. If I take a *neder* not to eat an apple, the apple itself is synonymous with pork, and is forbidden. Essentially, a *neder* is a way for people to mold the laws to make them work for each individual. The laws of *nedarim* allow for individual initiative.

And so, as I walk through the streets of Yerushalyim, pray at the kotel, and learn Torah, I feel God's presence in a deeply religious and powerful way. But, I am also in awe of the way in which people have molded and enhanced the land. And there are small and big ways that humans realize God's light in our world. The kotel, which used to be overrun by men and women begging for money, now has a permanent soup kitchen to help those in need. Technology has empowered Israeli society to be key contributors to the world at large. And at the Hartman Institute, God's Torah is studied and analyzed. And then we determine how to ensure that God's laws are relevant for the Jewish people. How the light that God created can continue to inspire and enlighten each of us. I am looking forward to bringing back the light that I receive here, to each of you.

