

Leadership Based on Transparency & Trust

Parashat Pikudei 5778

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

Just a week ago Wednesday, I was standing at the rostrum of the Maryland Senate Chamber in Annapolis. Har Shalom member and District 17 Senator Cheryl Kagan invited me to give the invocation in the Senate that morning, which I had done two previous times in the past. The Maryland Senate chamber is disarmingly intimate. There are only 47 state senators meeting in the hundred year old, marble-columned room that is lit by a tiffany-style skylight above. After I spoke, I sat for a few moments to schmooze with Senate President Mike Miller, a sort of unofficial requirement of being his guest on the podium. I had planned to make a rather quick exit to get back to Potomac, which I have done in the past, but then something happened that I hadn't seen before. You see usually the Senate's business begins by acknowledging special visitors in the gallery, bestowing various honorary citations and proclamations, and the like. But on *this* morning, fervent debate over a pending bill began almost immediately, and I couldn't quite pull myself away so quickly. Senator Paul Pinsky of Prince George's County introduced a bill that would require any candidate for President of the United States to release his or her tax returns going back five years, before being allowed to appear on a ballot anywhere in the State of Maryland. Senators leapt to their feet to defend the proposed measure, arguing that voters deserved to know this information about the most powerful office holder in the world; while others wasted no time pillorying it, questioning its constitutionality and suggesting it was a not so thinly veiled attack on the current White House occupant. It was a vigorous debate, and in the end the measure passed 28-17, and will now head across the hall to the House of Delegates, and ultimately to the Governor.¹

I wished I could have taken the microphone again just for a few moments to give the senators a quick d'var Torah about Parashat Pikudei...unfortunately that was not an option. But if I could have, this is what I might have shared with them...

The word *Pikudei*, the very name of the parasha means "expenses," "charges," "accounting." *Eileh pikudei ha'mishkan*², these are the financial records, the spread sheets, the ledgers of the

¹ "Md. Senate Passes Bill Requiring Presidential Candidates to Release Tax Returns," Lauren Wamsley. National Public Radio, March 6, 2018

² Exodus 38:21

capital project of building the Holy Tabernacle. Every piece of gold, every silver shekel, every fleck of copper, every precious stone, fabric, cloth, cord, clasp, socket is listed by weight, number, and usage. It is an accountant's dream, a bookkeeper's fantasy, every auditor's aspiration. Why does the Torah go into such granular detail about each and every contribution to the Tabernacle project? The Midrash³ relates that certain Israelites were talking behind Moses's back; they said 'Look at his physique...he's so healthy, so well-fed, so robust.' To which others responded, 'Of course the person in charge of the Tabernacle is a rich man,' suggesting that perhaps he pocketed some of the donations for himself. Moses overheard these allegations and said, 'I vow, that as soon as the Tabernacle is completed, I will give you a full accounting of everything.' Hence the words: *eileh pikudei ha'mishkan* in our parasha, these are the accountings of the Tabernacle.

In fact, another Midrash⁴ teaches that anyone who had contact with the treasury funds was not permitted to wear garments with pockets, folds, or even shoes made of cloth in order to be completely above any suspicion of theft. A number of other sources in the Talmud describe similar precautions that were taken by Temple personnel to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing.

But was Moses's punctilious accounting really necessary? In the book of II Kings we learn of the 8th Century Judean King Yehoash, who, at least at the beginning of his reign, was pious and righteous. Noticing that the Temple had fallen into disrepair, he launched a fundraising campaign to renovate and restore it. The text surprisingly states that there was no requirement to produce any accounting of the money contributed for this project or the payments made to the workers, *ki be'emunah hem osim*, because they acted with complete honesty. So it seems that since the people involved were considered to be ethical and scrupulous, no financial records were demanded. So maybe Moses went beyond the letter of the law by revealing every last detail of the Tabernacle's financing.⁵ Perhaps Moses realized something that has been lost on some of today's leaders, that it's not only important to be ethical, it also important to appear ethical. Great leaders understand that trust is indispensable to their effectiveness. Charles Koch, the CEO of Koch Industries who just this month was ranked the sixth richest person in the world,

³ Shemot Rabbah 31:6

⁴ Shemot Rabbah 31:2

⁵ Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan. "Essays on Ethics," p. 147

once said: “When hiring, if forced to choose between virtue and talent, choose virtue.” So did Moses have to be so transparent? Probably not. If there’s anyone who should be considered above reproach it should be Moses! But by going beyond the letter of the law, and being completely transparent, Moses demonstrates a leadership style based on a foundation of trust and honesty.

As the great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “A nation that suspects its leaders of corruption cannot function effectively as a free, just, and open society. It is the mark of a good society that public leadership is seen as a form of service rather than a means to power, which is all too easily abused...Moses’ personal example, in giving an accounting of the funds that had been collected for the first collective project of the Jewish people, set a vital precedent for all time.”⁶

⁶ Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan. “Essays on Ethics,” p. 149