Sermon | Parshat Behar
May 21, 2022 | כ׳ אייר תשפ״ב
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This past week I traveled to Israel on a rabbinic mission with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. We arrived in Israel on Monday afternoon and returned yesterday at 5:00 AM. The trip may have been brief, but each day was packed with meetings, encounters, and visits. Based in Jerusalem, we visited the Jewish Agency, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Mount Herzl, East Jerusalem, and the mixed cities of Lod and Ramle. We met with Israelis of all kinds: secular, religious Zionist, Haredi, Ethiopian, Mizrahi, and more. And we met with Arab Israelis: secular and religious; politicians and community leaders, journalists and others. We met with some faces who are familiar to B'nai Israel, such as former community senior *shlicha* Penina Agenyahu and our very own Avi Meyerstein. It was by far the most diverse group of people who call Israel their home that I have met in any given week. There is no way that I can sufficiently relate all of these encounters to you in the brief time that I will address the congregation this morning. Instead, I will share with you a one story that is emblematic of what I learned during this mission, especially in light of what we also learn from Parshat Behar.

This story begins in Ramle, one of only seven major cities in Israel referred to as "mixed cities," which means that the cities are home to both Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis.[1] But this does not mean that the populations live in an integrated way. Rather, there are typically distinct Jewish neighborhoods, distinct Arab neighborhoods, and perhaps one or two areas where the two communities are intermingled. In Ramle, our group met with two incredibly

[1] The mixed cities are (with some debate): Akko, Haifa, Jaffa, Ramle, Lod, Ma'alot Tarshiha, and Upper Nazareth.

impressive and influential individuals: Aliza, a Haredi woman who is the director of the Mediation Center there, and Mino, a member of the city council from the Ra'am party, representing religious Muslims. You may recall that last year, violence erupted in some of the mixed cities, especially in neighboring Lod, in response to certain domestic issues. But in Ramle, the violence was relatively brief and nobody was killed—something that cannot be said of Lod. This is because of the Mediation Center and its cooperation with the city government, whereby the residents of Ramle are in direct cooperation and dialogue with one another. They have a history of intentional relationships and strong communal leadership. They shared with us one story to illustrate the power of these relationships that I wish to share with you today.

In 2015, Yom Kippur and the Muslim celebration of Eid al-Adha fell on the same day—something that occurs about once every thirty-three years. In a city with a mixed population, this posed a potential problem because Eid al-Adha is a celebratory holiday for Muslims. They drive to pray at the mosque, they grill and eat some of the finest meats, and they distribute baked goods and sweets to family and friends. The atmosphere is boisterous and joyful. That, of course, sounds nothing like Yom Kippur—a day of deep self-introspection, fasting, with a somber, muted atmosphere. How, then, would the city of Ramle find a way to ensure that all of its residents were able to observe their own holiday without seemingly insulting or aggravating the other? The forum of leaders from each of its various communities which meets at the Mediation Center spent months discussing this question and proposing measures that would ensure that this day would be peaceful for all. It began with an informational campaign: posters were hung up around the city explaining the customs of each holiday; religious leaders were encouraged to educate their communities about the other; and a public service announcement

video was widely shared. All of that just to *prepare* the communities. In coordination with the city's government and especially its police department, certain roads were blocked off and rerouted to permit Muslim worshippers to easily travel to their mosques but without driving through Jewish neighborhoods on Yom Kippur. (If you have never been to Israel on Yom Kippur, this last point might have been lost on you. It is not illegal to drive on Yom Kippur, but it is an almost universally held practice that nobody drives on Yom Kippur in Israel, not even the most secular.) In the end, the day was quiet, peaceful, and everyone was able to celebrate their own holiday without any provocations. This was just one of the success stories of Ramle, which relied upon a model of communication between people, valuing their shared city, and many hours of intentional dialogue with all parties at the table.

It takes this kind of investment in interpersonal relationships and communal dialogue to build a city where all communities feel that they are represented. Which brings me to this week's *parsha*, Behar. Most of the *parsha* is about laws which govern land ownership and use, and other aspects of an agrarian economy. We learn about the *shmittah* cycle, whereby the residents of Israel work the land for six years but allow the land to rest in the seventh. During that year, all of the land's produce is *hefker*; it is free for anyone to take as much as they need to feed themselves and their families, but not to be sold for profit. This is done for seven cycles, after which the Jubilee is proclaimed in the fiftieth year. In that year, land returns to its original owners, debts are canceled, and indentured servants are freed. These practices are a demonstration of the importance of how we treat one another, how communities care about all of their inhabitants, and how a society is built upon shared values and ideals.

The *parsha* concludes with a seemingly unrelated verse: "You shall keep My sabbaths, אֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמֹרוּ, and venerate My sanctuary, Mine, Adonai's, וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִּירָאוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה."[2] Typically, when we hear Shabbat and Sanctuary, we think Shabbat and Temple; two significant mitzvot in the Torah that suggest a deep abiding connection between an individual Jewish person and God. In other words, we perform this category of *mitzvot* to reach towards God and construct a relationship with the Divine.

The Hizkuni, a 13th century French rabbi, understands this verse differently. He says that Shabbat is not a reference to the seventh day of the week, but to the seventh year in the *shmittah* cycle. Shabbat, in this context, is about not harvesting the produce of the seventh year so that all who are poor may come and partake. Hizkuni further teaches that Mikdash in this context is not Temple, but Jubilee. The verse is a reminder to observe the *shmittah* cycle and to mark the 50th year, during which time we proclaim liberty for all the land's inhabitants. According to Hizkuni, the verse is a reminder of our obligations to society, not to God.

The mitzvot of Judaism work primarily in two directions. There are those that operate vertically, where we reach up towards God, and we call these *mitzvot ben adam l'Makom*, sacred obligations between a person and God. Shabbat, the sacrifices of the Temple, and so many others fit in this category. Then there are the mitzvot that operate horizontally, where we reach out towards one another. We call these *mitzvot ben adam l'havero*, sacred obligations between one person and another. Tzedekah, hospitality to guests, honoring each person as one created in the Divine image all fit in this category.

[2] Leviticus 26:2.

As Jews, we must operate in both directions. We find ways to cultivate a vertical relationship with God just as we find other ways to build relationships with those who are around us. This week, in Israel, I was reminded of the power of the latter, the power of building relationships with others and taking that just as seriously as Shabbat, kashrut, and any other ritual commandment of our tradition. When Israel's domestic conflicts led to a flare up within mixed cities last May, it was Ramle that showed us what to do. It was the infrastructure that had been built up over many years of cooperation and communication which enabled the city to manage the tension. Recently, President Isaac Herzog called Ramle a model city for cities around the world. The city has reached this point because it elevated the values of person-to-person cooperation, *mitzvot bein adam l'havero*, to be at least on the same level as the values of their own personal religious affiliations, *mitzvot bein adam l'Makom*.

We all know that there are complexities, sensitivities, and nuances when we talk about the modern State of Israel. You all know that I am an unapologetic Zionist, that I am active in AIPAC, and that I believe wholeheartedly in our right as a Jewish people to have a Jewish State in our native homeland. And, I know that Israel is a home for many types of Jews, and for people who are *not* Jews, and that if we are going to build a shared society where people live together in peace, then we must elevate the values that are *bein adam l'havero*, those which emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations and shared community-building. This was the message that we received from Jews and Arabs, from secular and religious, from nearly all corners of Israeli society that aspire to build a State of Israel where all can prosper and live in peace.