

Parashat Bo 5780 – The Power of Pluralism

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Let's talk about the 2020 election!

No – I'm not talking about the 2020 presidential election; and I'm not even talking about Israel's parliamentary election – the third such election in the past 12 months, which will take place on March 2. I have opinions on these elections like everyone else, and I trust that you don't really want to hear them from the *bima*. I want to talk about another election, taking place right now online, a worldwide election of the Jewish people, because I hope each of you will participate.

Once every five years, the World Zionist Organization holds an election to determine leadership of the World Zionist Congress. When the World Zionist Congress was first convened by Theodor Herzl in 1897, it was to be a quasi-government for the Jewish people that would lead the Zionist project towards the creation of a Jewish State. Today, 71-plus years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the primary function of the World Zionist Congress is to allocate funds. Our Jewish Federation – like federations throughout the world – assigns a percentage of its funds to “projects in Israel,” which it gives over to the Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency, through the World Zionist Congress, determines how those funds will be spent. We are talking about more than a billion dollars. This worldwide Jewish election impacts Israeli society in important ways.

Before I tell you who to vote for, I want to look at some features of the Passover sacrifice, which we read about in Parashat Bo. I invite you to turn in your *humashim* to page 389. In preparation for the exodus, the Israelites are commanded to take a lamb on the tenth day of the first month, which is Nisan. On the 14th day of the month, they are to slaughter the lamb and sprinkle some of the blood on the doorpost in order to protect their homes from the plague against the first born. Then on that evening – and in subsequent years for all time – the people are to roast and eat the lamb. We read on page 389:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the Passover offering [for all time]: No foreigner shall eat of it. But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised. No bound or hired laborer shall eat of it.

The Passover sacrifice is the quintessential ritual for Jewish community and peoplehood. This is the only *mitzvah* that requires circumcision; and it is one of very few rituals reserved for citizens of the Israelite community. The paschal sacrifice designates the Exodus as the moment when Jews became a people.

So it is tribalistic. And the text continues:

It shall be eaten in one house, בבית אחד יאכל: you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house; nor shall you break a bone of it [this detail was very important to the New Testament authors, but it doesn't concern us right now.] The whole community of Israel shall offer it [If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be

circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.] There shall be one law, תורה אחת, for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you. And all the Israelites did so, as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.

I am struck by the juxtaposition that every person followed the commandment, one law, but performed it separately in each household. The Talmud understands the “one house” requirement not literally, but that the meal should be eaten in *havurot*, in groups. People would come together in groups, mini-communities, to observe the commandment. And they were essentially trusted to do it correctly. There is no central authoritative sacrifice in Exodus. In Temple times, the sacrifices were offered in one place, but there was no ritual police to ensure that uniform participation in the meal rites.

We don't sacrifice a paschal lamb anymore, but the principle applies to today's Passover *seder*. Statistics suggest that the *seder* is the most popularly observed ritual in Jewish life; 70 percent of Jews claim to participate in a *seder* every year. But there is no definition as to what that means. We know that some may have a *seder* that they wouldn't feel comfortable inviting the rabbi to; and, frankly, some of you would probably come up with an excuse and politely decline if I invited you to my *seder*. And that's okay. That's what pluralism is. We agree on the big Torah that there is this quintessentially important holiday called Passover with a primary celebration called a *seder*; and there are rules. And communities and individuals are going to interpret them differently.

Jewish community works the same way. The Talmud takes a verse in Deuteronomy, “*lo titgodedu*,” which literally refers to a prohibition against gashing yourself as a sign of mourning, and interprets it as “*lo taasu agudot agudot*, you shall not create factions.” We have only one Torah, one Jewish law. We don't have factions ... but we do have *havurot*. Sephardic Jews practice differently than Ashkenazi Jews; Conservative Jews practice differently than Reform or Reconstructionist or Orthodox. Today we live in a post-denominational world where the differences between movements don't matter that much. Okay – men and women sit separately in Beth Shalom, *kashrut* is not observed at Beth Ami, we read the full Torah portion at B'nai Israel and they read a third of the portion at Har Shalom. There is no *mitzvah* police; each community does what it does, and we are united by the larger principles. To quote an American presidential candidate, “The differences between us are pretty trivial compared to the things we share in common.” That's what pluralism means. There is more than one way to practice Judaism.

Except in Israel, the Jewish state. In Israel, there is a state-sponsored Orthodox rabbinate that decides what is officially accepted. There are certain advantages – there are more kosher restaurants in Israel; Jewish education is essentially free; it is very easy to open a neighborhood Orthodox synagogue. The problem is for the 80% of the population who consider themselves secular, who define Judaism as Orthodox and choose not to participate. That is detrimental to the future of Judaism.

Synagogues, schools, institutions that embody pluralistic values do not receive government funding, which makes it difficult to do their work of attracting non-Orthodox Jews to Jewish culture and tradition. Instead of multiple communities observing the one Torah in their metaphorical homes, it

sometimes looks like one community practicing in one way with too many people walking away from their heritage.

And that's where the election comes in. www.mercaz2020.org. Mercaz (Slate #6) – the word means center – is our movement's party to the World Zionist Organization, and it is one of a handful of parties that espouses pluralistic values. The goal is not to defeat the Orthodox. The goal is to support the Passover model that supports diverse institutions who promote multiple interpretations of Torah and accept that different Jews will practice Judaism in different ways, each with a legitimate claim of authenticity. Any Jew can vote in this election; information is in the Shabbat program; and I hope you will take action: multiple communities living out the values of one Torah.

I think about the pluralistic vision in relation to the larger America-Jewish-Israel relationship. We know about the fissures. There is a fear that our communities are factionalizing, turning into *agudot*. We worry about waning support because there is only one Jewish state.

But there is a parallel danger – that if “unity,” if support means agreeing on a single vision, if it means asserting that one political party supports Israel more than the other, that's a problem. There are forces in this country and in Israel that want *agudot*, that want to garner electoral strength by focusing on what divides us and creating wedges. We have to affirm the Passover principle of multiple houses, multiple groups, multiple legitimate expressions of what it means to be one people with one Torah and one land.

Liberals, progressives, conservatives, hawks, doves all share fundamental values and beliefs:

- The centrality of the Land of Israel as the spiritual and historical homeland for the Jewish people;
- The fundamental right of the Jewish people to self-determination in its own land;
- The reality that there is a conflict that must be resolved through negotiation between the parties. Peace cannot be imposed by the United Nations, the international community, or any of its member states.

These are trying times for the Jewish people. And in trying times, we have to affirm that every single one of us matters. In this election season, let us choose the celebration of our diversity over the demonization of our differences. Let us follow the model of our ancestors – many communities, diverse groups, multiple interpretations of one Torah for one Israel serving the One God. Shabbat shalom.