

“Looking Back and Looking Forward”

Parashat Pekudei

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Looking into the future is not easy. And for that reason, most of us, most of the time, look back. It’s the rare person who is described as “*ro-eh et ha-nolad*,” someone who can see what has not yet come into being. Such people tend to be successful, because, anticipating what is to come, they prepare for it.

This past week, I was away for about four days, attending a conference held by the Wexner Foundation. The Wexner Foundation, founded by Leslie Wexner, a highly successful entrepreneur, supports students pursuing careers within the Jewish community, and future Jewish lay leaders. I was a Wexner Graduate Fellow while I was in rabbinical school; since then, periodically, I attend institutes intended for graduate fellow alumni.

This institute focused on “Making Change in a Changing World.” How do we as individuals approach change? How do our institutions approach change?

The simple response, usually, is, of course, “kicking and screaming.” Although we may recognize that change is necessary, we often resist it. Individuals often resist it, and institutions often resist it.

Now, that can work for a while. After all, some of the strategies that helped individuals or institutions thrive in the past can continue to work into the future, for a while at least. But eventually, if the environment, or the conditions, or the world in which one is functioning have changed substantially, generally, change is necessary. If it doesn’t occur, the individual, or the institution, may not survive, or if it survives, it may not thrive.

One of our speakers was Ron Heifetz, who teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Ron is the author of the book, “Leadership without Easy Answers,” and other popular guides to leadership in business and politics. I first



studied with Ron Heifetz twenty-five years ago, and I continue to find him stimulating. Ron's focus was on adaptive change. How do you carry it out? How do you overcome the inevitable resistance, within individuals and within institutions?

He shared an interesting observation: successful, highly transformative change is highly conservative. Human beings have a lot in common with chimpanzees. If you look at the DNA of humans and chimps, there's a great deal of overlap. More than 90%. In fact, though some might quibble with the details, according to one measure it's more than 99%. And yet, think of the differences between our species. Think of the enormous adaptability that changing only 1% of our DNA has accomplished.

That's encouraging, I think. It suggests that, when facing an adaptive challenge, we don't have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. We don't have to totally or even substantially alter who we are. Yes, we have to adapt; but we don't have to change that much to accomplish that.

Just as organisms on our planet were forced to change to adapt to changing physical conditions, so too, when we face cultural challenges, we have to change. We can't bring all of our cultural DNA into the future. Some just doesn't help us. We have to ask ourselves three questions: (1) What can we take with us? (2) What we should leave behind? and (3) What innovations are necessary?

The Jewish people have survived for over three thousand years. We have not only survived, we have flourished. We have done so by adapting to the environments—sometimes very challenging environments—in which we have found ourselves. We have adapted so well that we can speak of “the Jewish people,” even though Jews living in the past had very different beliefs than we do, and behaved quite differently from the way that we do. (Today, Noah spoke about the clothing of the high priest, about which we read from the Torah today. We live in a world where we no longer have a high priest. We haven't had one for two thousand years. And yet, we're still here.)

Maybe part of our adaptability, part of our resilience, has to do with the fact that we still read the same book that our ancestors read. Even when the Temple was burning in the year 70, and Jews were being sent as slaves throughout the Roman Empire; even when the Bar Kokhba revolt was being put down in 135 and Jews were forbidden to enter the city of Jerusalem; even hundreds of years later, when Jews migrated to Central Europe and then eventually to Eastern Europe; even

when they migrated to Spain and went back and forth as power shifted between the Muslims and the Christians, ... through all that turmoil, we kept reading the same book, and studying the same texts. We came to understand them differently, but somehow, by focusing on what was at the center of our collective consciousness, we were able to remain tethered to our principles and to our faith, and yet also open to adapting to new—even alien—environments.

How is the world, in which today's Jewish people finds itself, changing? (The changes are so dramatic that we might more easily ask, How is it *not* changing? Think for a moment: three teens from our congregation recently returned from participating in the Havayah program in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine. Their return flight was altered so that they didn't have to have a layover in Kiev.)

Consider the changes going on around Israel:

- Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology
- Tens of thousands of missiles in the possession of non-state actors, along the Lebanese border and along the Gaza border
- Tens of thousands of African refugees seeking asylum
- Political turmoil in Egypt
- Political turmoil (and a humanitarian disaster) unfolding in Syria
- The huge growth of the Ultra-Orthodox sector of society: on welfare, resistant to State authority, and increasingly militant
- Ongoing unresolved conflict with Palestinians

I could go on and on. (Think how tough it must be to do strategic planning for the Israeli army!)

More to the point, the American Jewish community is rapidly changing. The recent Pew study made this clear. We're going to hear a detailed analysis of the Pew Study from Professor Len Saxe at services on March 22nd, but I'm sure that it will not be a surprise to people to realize that, just as in so many ways, the America in which we live is different from the America of the middle of the twentieth century, when so many of the Jewish community's institutions—its synagogues, its JCCs, its central agencies, its federations—were conceived and developed, so too does the Jewish community look a lot different than it did even twenty or thirty years ago.

One in five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion. Among millennials, the figure is one in three. This shift in Jewish self-identification

reflects broader changes in the U.S. public—which confirms the wisdom of the old truism, “Jews are like everybody else, only more so.”

How is this relevant to us? Well, compared to Jews by religion, Jews of *no* religion are not only less religious but also much less connected to Jewish organizations. And I’m not speaking only of synagogues. All those organizations with the letter “J” are feeling the change—organizations like JVS (Jewish Vocational Service), the JCRC (Jewish Community Relations Council), the JF&CS (Jewish Family and Children’s Service), the JCC (Jewish Community Center), the AJC (American Jewish Committee), and even the relatively young AJWS (American Jewish World Service).

Moreover, what Jews claim to be essential about Jewish life has changed. Only 69% feel that leading an ethical life is essential to their sense of Jewishness. (I don’t know about you, but I worry about the other 31%.) More Jews believe that remembering the Holocaust is essential to their sense of Jewishness than believe that living an ethical life is essential. And as many Jews believe that caring about Israel is an essential part of what being Jewish means to them as believe that having a good sense of humor is essential. (41%)

How should we respond to this?

Are we up to the task? Are our institutions adequate?

Are they sufficiently funded and staffed?

How will we handle the economic, demographic and other challenges of the future?

You don’t figure that out by ignoring it. You have to look at the present and try to predict what the future holds in store. You may have to speculate, you may have to make some guesses, but that’s better than ignoring the possibilities.

What can today’s *parashah* teach us about this? I think that there are three lessons that can be derived from today’s *parashah* that can help us face the future.

First, money plays an important role in the life of the community. Think of the name of today’s *parashah*: Pekudei. The word refers to an accounting, or an inventory. Today’s *parashah* contained a full accounting of the way in which the Jewish community in the wilderness collected and made use of the contributions that came in to build the tabernacle. And today was Shabbat Shekalim. The *maftir* portion that we read reminded us that every Israelite had to provide a half-shekel contribution in order to be counted—and to be counted upon.

You have to have financial resources to accomplish great things. Birthright Israel, one of the truly astounding potentially transformative initiatives of the last twenty years wouldn't have happened without money. Lots of it.

But we also learn from today's *parashah* that the way that the community allocates and expends its funds must be transparent. Without the trust that transparency brings, community leaders lack credibility.

Second, think how this week's *parashah* brings to a close the book of Exodus: with the completion of the Tabernacle at the center of the Israelite camp. Through all our wandering, through all our transformations, what's at the center? The Torah: our book of wisdom, insight, guidance, instruction.

Just like us today. What do we have at the center? An ark containing the Torah. It's our book, our sacred book that tells our story, that provides us with the way of life that has guided us throughout our wanderings. Yes, our interpretations reflect the ages and the societies in which we have lived: as I mentioned earlier, we don't dress the same way as our ancestors. But we continue to read and to ponder the same book.

Finally, there's something very interesting about the tabernacle that was built in the center of the Israelite camp. Notice that the Tabernacle was portable. The reason is obvious. The tabernacle was there to support us during our wandering in the wilderness. If the Tabernacle had been permanent it wouldn't have been practical.

Our institutions must also be portable and practical. Yes, we should build buildings. (Don't take me too literally!) The community needs a place to meet, it needs heat and hot water and all of the amenities.

But fundamentally, a portable sanctuary recognizes that, wherever we live and whatever era we find ourselves in, we're always wandering in the wilderness—and our institutions have to reflect that.

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Our shul is now 49 years old. We'll be celebrating our jubilee year next year. During these past 49 years, we have changed, we have evolved, we have adapted. Some things we have left behind as not essential to our mission—indeed, as

contrary to our mission. (For example, we are now fully egalitarian, which we weren't during the early years of our community.) We've also innovated. We've brought to our community new things that we hadn't had before.

Through it all, we've kept at the center what deserves to be at the center: 1) a fundamental identification with the Jewish people; 2) a fundamental loyalty to the Jewish tradition and its values; and (3) a fundamental fascination with and focus on the Torah, the fount of wisdom and insight that is at the center of our cultural identity.

As we face future challenges, may we continue to ask ourselves what we want to take with us into the future; what we need to leave behind; and what innovations we need to adopt. May we make those decisions in a thoughtful, informed, and deliberate way.

Shabbat shalom!