

DT—VaYakhel
2.26.2022

Our parasha, VaYakhel, focuses mainly on the implementation of God's instructions to build the *mishkan*. The people donate generously, and Betzalel, the gifted artisan, gets to work. As we've discussed a bit over the last few weeks, it's important to see this construction project in its greater biblical context—it's adjacent to the events of the Golden Calf, and serves either as a precursor to such awful behavior or as an antidote. Whichever one is actually true, by the time Betzalel begins the project, the people are in desperate need of unification, of repair. And coming together for this holy purpose provides just that.

But that's not all. Listen to the opening pesukim of the parasha:

"Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that Adonai has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to Adonai; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day."

What does Moshe convey to them right off the bat? Not "go get your silver and gold and crimson fabrics", but "let me introduce you—again—to the concept of sacred time—Shabbat".

The value of Shabbat is so clear to us, but it was new then. An Israelite, a Jewish innovation. True, Moshe's words err more on the prohibitive side of Shabbat; but I'd like us to consider the gifts Shabbat brings to our lives.

Relaxation

No pressure to run/do/create/travel

Yummy food

Face to face time with people we care about

A break from the onslaught of negative news

Shalom/peace

Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi in pre-state Israel, offered this reflection:

"Shabbat [, however,] provides an opportunity to attain a degree of harmony between our inner and outer lives....

The Sabbath, with its elevated holiness, comes to restore the purity of inner life that was suppressed and eroded by the corrupting influences of day-to-day life, influences that often contradict our true values and goals. But the power of Sabbath peace is even greater. Not only does Shabbat restore our inner world, but it reaches out to our outer world. The spiritual rest of Shabbat enables our outer life to be in harmony with our inner life, bestowing it a spirit of peace and holiness, joy and grace."

Rav Kook is so right—Shabbat operates on its own *and* as an influence and a regulator of the rest of our days. Fridays are a little hectic because everything needs to be ready. Each day of the week can easily be measured by how much time is left until Shabbat. More importantly, I think, is the way each of us can receive the gift of inner peace—we know how it feels, we are experienced in letting ourselves feel it, and we understand how precious it can be to share it with someone else. Even on a weekday.

For our ancestors, coming off of the chaos and mayhem of the Golden Calf, Shabbat would have been a new way to build community, to restore faith in God and in themselves. It would have begun to bolster them for the long journey ahead.

As we sit together today, celebrating Shabbat and enjoying that inner peace, we are most aware of an awful conflict, an unbridled quest for power—the very opposite of Shabbat—taking place in Ukraine.

I'm trying to keep up with the news as I know you are, and it's overwhelming and so scary. Many of our congregation surely have family ties to Ukraine and the surrounding areas, and you may be feeling this Russian invasion acutely. Please know I'm here to talk.

What you may not know, and what's not covered in mainstream media, is that there are still Jews in Ukraine—approximately 200,000 Jews in different cities. Our Federation for Jewish Philanthropy supports Jewish communities in the Volga region, not far from this area, and of course have launched an emergency fundraising campaign to aid Jewish individuals and communities in Ukraine. Same with the worldwide Masorti/Conservative movement. I've donated to both, and would urge you to contribute if you're able. The need is real and immediate.

I signed on to the Masorti movement's prayer vigil on Thursday afternoon—I hope you got the email in enough time to sign on yourself—and was so moved by the participation and the attendance from all corners of the earth. People offered support from all over the States, Mexico, Peru, Uganda, Israel, Germany... it literally felt like an online gathering of the Jewish people. We were blessed to hear from Rabbi Reuven Stamov, a classmate of mine from the Schechter school of rabbinic studies in Jerusalem, who serves the entire Masorti population of Ukraine.

A few more details on the Stamovs: Rabbi Reuven and his wife Lena (Mihal) run the Masoret Kyiv community and serve the entire country, visiting Kehillot in Chernivtsi, Odessa, Kharkov, and Dnipro, and offer Jewish religious services and organize, strengthen and develop the communities. Lena Stamov directs the NOAM youth programs which are active around Ukraine providing a social setting for Masorti youth to explore and learn about what it means to be Masorti and to grow and develop as leaders within the movement.

Rabbi Reuven shared with us that things are very scary right now, and that all Ukrainian Jews are being evacuated to the westernmost Jewish community of Chernivtsi, which is

prepared to feed and house them all, and to evacuate out of Ukraine if that becomes necessary.

What does all of this mean for us? I'm not 100% sure yet. But I know what it cannot mean. It cannot mean that we flip through the news and bemoan the war happening *over there*. Without even touching on global politics—and of course that does play a major role—we must remind ourselves that Rabbi Reuven and Lena and the 200,000 Jews of Ukraine are just like us. They, too, want to be celebrating Shabbat with family and community. They want to read Torah and discuss the parasha, not pack whatever fits into a suitcase and flee their homes in the dead of winter.

We are K'lal Yisrael, the collective Jewish people, and whatever happens to some of us affects us all. Together, we pray for a swift and peaceful end to this war. We pray for a return to a world where Shabbat can be enjoyed, and its message of peace felt each day throughout the world. *Ken yehi ratzon*—may that be God's will.