

Aliens, Tabernacles, and the Shep689 Channel

Rosh ha-Shana Morning II -- 7 September 2013

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“Not your parents’ synagogue.” That’s a slogan that this congregation occasionally uses in its promotional materials. It was on buttons that we handed out last summer at the Capital Pride Festival, and has occasionally appeared in our advertising and as our Facebook cover page photo. The slogan has evoked mixed reaction. One congregant did not appreciate it: she became interested in Judaism at her parents’ synagogue, and complained that it was a gratuitous slam at the older generation.

I suspect that the people who developed the slogan had more noble intentions. They certainly did not want to make parents feel unwelcome; i’m pleased to state that my parents are here today. Instead, the slogan seeks to convey that this congregation has different, more welcoming, attitudes about LGBT people, about people who are in diverse family relationships, and about people who are Jews by choice than the prototypical American Jewish suburban congregation of the 1960s or 1970s.

There's another, more subtle distinction, and that refers to the style and approach of worship. Many of us grew up in congregations where everyone said the same prayers week after week, year after year. They were the prayers that the congregants, the parents of the congregants, and likely the grandparents of the congregants had grown up reciting. They comported with tradition. They connected Jews of the present generation to those of the past. They satisfied ritual requirements. Whether they were meaningful for the congregants was not a principal concern or objective of the liturgy.

Here, that's different. Praying is not supposed to be merely a check-the-box exercise. It's supposed to be meaningful for each congregant. Prayers are added and deleted, translations are tweaked. Sometimes, as in the service you are attending, the sequence of the service is changed. The overall message is not one of praying as your parents or ancestors did -- particularly if they were not observant or were not Jewish. Instead, congregants are invited to develop their own personal relationship with God. The objective of our High Holy Days services is to have congregants use that personal relationship as a means of healing themselves and becoming better people.

To be frank, we are not now unusual in that respect. Many congregations today attempt to focus on the individual. This makes sense, especially when dealing with cosmopolitan or affluent people who tend to be unpersuaded by appeals to perpetuate traditions. This is particularly true when those traditions may have marginalized or shunned them. And it's not just synagogues. Many contemporary American institutions strive to convince their clientele that they will address its personal needs. They offer personal trainers, personal bankers, personal shoppers, even personal chefs. The organization or institution that will win your allegiance is most likely not one that treats you as if you were a cog in the machine. It will be one that treats you as if you were a star.

Particularly with modern technology, there are many inducements to treat ourselves as stars. We can use Facebook or Twitter to proclaim the milestones of our lives -- whether anyone cares or not. We can use Yelp to play restaurant critic, to promote shopkeepers we like, and condemn those we don't. We can be broadcasters on YouTube. We can promote our professional credentials on LinkedIn. When one's self-promotion has sufficient cleverness and verve, that person can create a personal brand, which can yield him or her influence, fame, and even fortune.

Yet the Torah portion that Bet Mishpachah has selected to read on the second day of Rosh ha-Shana relates a message that is very different from one promoting the importance of the individual. The main theme of this portion -- *Va-Yakhel/Pikudei* -- concerns the construction of the Tabernacle. In the portion, Adonai commands “everyone whose heart so moves” him or her to contribute materials for the tabernacle. Additionally, “all among you who are skilled” were directed to contribute labor. The entire community participated in such numbers that Moses ultimately directed them to cease their contributions.

With such an extensive turnout, one would imagine a huge number of thank-yous were in order. We’re all familiar with the Torah’s frequent and often numbing lists of names. Wouldn’t such a list be warranted here, when so many community members helped contribute to such a successful project? So many people had a chance to shine as stars in this enterprise.

In this instance, however, only two members of the corps of hundreds, if not thousands, of contributors receive any recognition. One is the project manager, Bezalel, who is described in the text as one whom Adonai has “endowed . . . with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft and . . . inspired . . . to make designs for work in gold,

silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood — to work in every kind of designer's craft — and to give directions.” The second is his assistant, Oholiab, who has received from Adonai “the skill to do any work — of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver — as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.” And that’s it. All the artisans, all the donors, all the worker bees whose contributions were presumably essential to the finished tabernacle go nameless and unrecognized. They’re not only not the stars, they are not even considered part of the supporting cast. They are treated more like extras.

Commentaries about this portion, to the extent they address this matter at all, tend to focus on why Bezalel and Oholiab were thrust from obscurity and receive such prominent treatment. Most tend to focus on these individuals’ talents as artisans, and, in the case of Bezalel, his ability as a supervisor or mentor. One Orthodox Jewish source emphasizes the lineage of the pair, and non-Jewish commentators tend to emphasize the manner in which God supposedly “calls” on people for service. Something on which none of the sources I consulted focused is why the rest of the community was left out.

The explanation of this that appears to be best supported by the text is that the two men have a unique set of talents that others simply did not share. Others may have been capable artisans, or generous contributors, but the work of Bezalel and Oholiab is inspired and divine. While our modern, progressive religion stresses that everyone has intrinsic worth as a human being, our experiences in the world around us underscore that not all people are equally talented at specific tasks. Some people excel, some do acceptably, and some -- let's be honest -- are flat-out dreadful. We deceive ourselves if we pretend otherwise or think that everyone who wants to be accorded star treatment deserves it.

I'll illustrate this by reference to a piece of fiction. Last fall I saw a local production of a play called "The Aliens." The play was not in fact about aliens; the central characters were Vermont natives and a student with a summer job in that state. Their distinction was that, unlike most characters in contemporary American dramas, they were not verbally adept. Instead, they were downright inarticulate. This concept would have been interesting in print. However, encountering characters on a stage 20 feet away prone to lengthy pauses because they could not figure out what to say was neither entertaining nor illuminating, and one scene in which

one of the characters kept repeating the word “ladder” for about three minutes was almost excruciating to watch. I learned that given the choice between watching a play with characters as glib as talk-radio hosts and ones whose ability at expressing themselves were much closer to the average person, I would choose the former every time. I would be so bold to venture that, despite what we say to others to appear politically correct, we really do not want to hear the tone-deaf sing, listen to the inarticulate speak, or study with an ignorant teacher.

What do we do with such people then? Humiliate them, ignore them, or marginalize them in the way that may have been done by the prototype not-so-good synagogue of our parents? As you might imagine, there must be some happy medium between such marginalization, on the one hand, and letting everyone be the diva of their dreams, on the other. Here are some ideas in this regard.

The first, which is suggested by the portion today, concerns the emphasis on community models. What the portion suggests is that community members chose the tasks for which they were best suited. The text does state that those who contributed to the project were the ones “who excelled in ability and whose spirit moved” them. Nearly everybody

can do some task creditably, even if it is something that is considered low-profile or even menial. Not everyone is well-suited for every role, much less for running a project.

This is something that is too often forgotten today in the quest for personal branding and to be a star. Here, in the spirit of the season, I must make a confession. I occasionally engage in activities that waste time. In an effort not to fritter away hours or money unnecessarily, I stay away from those big-budget TV shows like “Game of Thrones” or “Downton Abbey.” Instead, I watch seven to ten-minute videos on YouTube that I find entertaining if not exactly exemplary.

One channel I watch is run by two young men named Ricardo and Will who live together in Los Angeles and post daily videos. In one August episode, they invited several friends to their apartment. This occurred just after the conclusion of a YouTube convention about 30 miles away near Disneyland; everyone in the group was a YouTube content creator who had attended the convention. One shot in the video revealed several cameras stationed in the apartment living room. Nearly all the content creators were recording the get-together to use on their personal channels.

If the content creators had decided to engage in a collective effort, they were capable of producing an excellent video. Labor could have been divided to create a script, costuming, set decoration. There could have been entertainment, information, something lasting, something perhaps even inspiring. But that's not what transpired. Each of the content creators wanted creative control, the ability to frame a narrative, and most importantly, the ability to receive all the advertising revenues generated by the subscribers visiting their channel. So the result was multiple videos of less than compelling content showing people doing no more than hanging out. Imagine what would have happened if each of the children of Israel had decided to build his or her own tabernacle for the community. Presumably none of the individual tabernacles would have been as impressive as the one that was ultimately built, and several probably would have been ramshackle or unsightly creations. While the ability to maximize autonomy and self-fulfillment of community members may be important, so is the need for excellence. Any successful community needs to balance these objectives.

The second idea involves distinguishing the values used for personal spirituality from those used to run a community. Prayer and how we relate

to God are personal matters. Some of us perceive we can achieve personal relationships with God. Others may be closet agnostics who nonetheless believe religion is useful because it provides an objective basis for behavioral norms. There's no problem with being the star in our relationship with God.

But just as our liturgy instructs us that forgiveness from humans must be sought separately from forgiveness from God, our relationship with God can't necessarily serve as a model for our relationship with other people. Communities can't work effectively when everyone seeks to be treated as a star. Communities work best when people can collaborate. Indeed, even the biggest stars can be secure enough that they will sometimes take cameo or supporting roles. In the year ahead, let us strive to be more like the community in today's Torah reading -- and less like the people I saw on YouTube. Shana Tova.