

## Elliot Philips

### *D'var Torah*

## VAYAHKEL

As a Bar Mitzvah, I have become part of a long Jewish tradition of learning and teaching. Now that I have read from the Torah, it is time to make sense of my Torah portion. Today's portion is called *Vayahkel*, which means "to assemble." In the story, Moses relates to his people G-d's command to assemble in order to build a great Tabernacle that will enable them to worship as a community. The word for community, *kehillah*, comes from the word *vayahkel*. Community is a very important concept for Jews. In the time of Moses, the Jewish community consisted of a group of nomadic Israelites wandering through the Sinai desert. Today, Jews are scattered all over the world, but through shared traditions and rituals, we remain members of a tightly knit community. The New Shul is a perfect example of how Jews value community. Today you are all sitting in our borrowed Tabernacle. But as modern Jews, we do not need sky-blue wool or acacia wood or a golden menorah to have a community. Our community is created by sharing rituals and values, and by learning together. In preparation for my Bar Mitzvah I was asked to choose a ritual mitzvah. I chose to say the Shema every night. I felt this connected me to Jews all over the world.

Interestingly, the word *vayahkel* was first used to describe the gathering of the Israelites who made the golden calf when Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the laws from God. Here, the word is used to describe the community coming together to build the Tabernacle. The first gathering was in defiance of G-d; this community assembly is blessed by G-d. In the first gathering the Israelites came together to worship an idol, in this gathering they are assembling with the desire to worship God and uphold the commandments. Each Israelite is involved in building the Tabernacle for God, something to hold the community together. In this way G-d has given the Jews a second chance to make up for the Golden Calf and to show how they can do something productive and honorable as a community. In this gathering each person gave something of themselves to build the Tabernacle. The Israelites took this opportunity, this second chance, to make a greater, more noble effort as a member of the community.

In modern times we too are offered second chances. For example new leadership for the Palestinians might signal a second chance for peace in the Middle East. (In some cases even a second chance is not enough; the Red Sox needed 86 chances.) What my Torah portion demonstrates is that it's not just individuals who can learn and grow from second chances, but whole communities, even countries, can as well. If we are fortunate enough to get a second chance, it is wise for us to behave like the Israelites and make better decisions the second time around. We need to learn from our mistakes.

The vast majority of my Torah portion is a long and detailed telling of G-d's instructions about how the Tabernacle should be built. But these instructions are preceded by three sentences that command the Israelites to observe the Sabbath as a day of rest. What is the meaning of this introduction when most of the portion is about building a Tabernacle? At first glance it seems to be out of place. I believe that, before G-d gives instructions for such a difficult undertaking as the building of the Tabernacle, God wants to remind the Israelites that they must not neglect the Sabbath, even during busy times of great work. Another way to look at it is that a day of rest is a reward, a gift, for hard work and that G-d commands that we accept this gift. This confirms how forgiving and generous G-d is.

On the seventh day of creation G-d created rest. Adonai created the Sabbath because G-d had worked extremely hard the past six days and G-d needed to look over his illustrious creation. G-d created Shabbat because if there were no rest there would be no sense of work, one would be working all the time. Without darkness we cannot appreciate light and if there was no sadness we wouldn't appreciate joy. I think G-d created rest along with these other aspects of life to create a balance that is so very much needed, especially in our busy modern lives. Just as G-d had to create rest, we have to make time for rest. We need rest not only to regenerate, but also to look back on our day, week, month, or even year. Looking back is very important because if we don't make evaluations on our actions and decisions, we might make the same mistakes over, and over again.

Shabbat is also a time for families to be together. With everyone running in so many directions, it's nice to know everyone will be together for one day of the week. Shabbat is also a way to honor our tradition. Jews have been observing Shabbat for thousands of years and by observing it, we are brought closer to every Jew since the time of the Tabernacle. In our community we believe that every generation must decide how to observe Shabbat, remembering where the tradition came from, but making it relevant for today.

I believe an important aspect of Shabbat is to do something that is different from other days. For me that means **not** going to school. Also, my family tries to get together for dinner on Friday nights. We go to a nearby Sushi restaurant and we call it 'Shabbat Sushi'. Some Jews might just try to make the day feel special. To make my Sabbath special I take time to become closer with the people that I love and ultimately to become closer with G-d.

It is interesting that in the time of Moses, worshiping G-d involved giving over one's material possessions. Moses commands the Israelites to "Collect among yourselves an offering to G-d...[this can include] gold, silver, blue-sky wool, fine linen, etc." As modern Jews, we do not think in these terms when we looking at our relationship with G-d. Although we support our synagogue with material or monetary contributions, I don't think of it as giving an "offering" to G-d. But we do give of ourselves to G-d. Just by going to services one is giving to G-d because it shows that you care about G-d, your Jewish religion, and your Jewish community. But it is important to remember that our modern offerings to G-d do not begin or end at the synagogue door. Each time I do a good deed I give to G-d because I am helping to improve the world that G-d created.

It is very significant that Moses does not insist that all members of the community give their possessions or labor to the building of the Tabernacle. God asks for "everyone whose heart is so moved" or "each person who is ready to volunteer" to make contributions. In other words, Moses does not demand that each person contribute, but he wants each individual to decide whether they should and how much to contribute. I think it is important that Moses gives the Israelites the choice rather than demanding that they contribute. If they donated out of fear or guilt, the building of the Tabernacle would not have been very meaningful. Because everyone contributed willingly, it really brought the community together. This act of working together willingly occurs in all communities. There is no such thing as a community without the will to work together. This is an important lesson for our time. Our nation is currently attempting to create democracies in the Middle East, a region that has no tradition of liberty and democracy. Our efforts will only succeed if the people of the Middle East participate willingly in the process. This rule applies not only to nations but also to individuals. Six years ago the New Shul was just an idea. The only reason it is thriving today is because a lot of people put effort into creating it from scratch. No one could be ordered to contribute to this effort, they participated because it came from their heart and sense of community, ritual and traditional. In our B'nai Mitzvah Academy some parents volunteer to teach classes. This is setting a great example for us kids. When I play sports, like flag football or baseball, everyone gives 110% and the whole team benefits. I stand here a Bar Mitzvah not because I was told to do so but because it is something that I wanted to do. In this way, my becoming a Bar Mitzvah is much more meaningful to me. In talking about the building of the tabernacle and the commandment to observe Shabbat I have discussed two important requirements of community: first each persons willingness and desire to participate, and second, a sense of commitment to the greater whole. Both are needed to create a rich and lasting community.

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Shabbat Shalom

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