

In Our Name: Parashat Tetzaveh

When I was in rabbinical school, my Dean, Rabbi Bill Lebeau, would frequently say “If you’re not making people angry at least some of the time, you’re probably not doing your job very well.” I’ll admit that every time Rabbi Lebeau said this, I had a fleeting - yet very strong! - desire to walk myself right out the doors of JTS. On a personal level, the idea of regularly contributing to peoples’ unhappiness and frustration, let alone becoming the target of their rage, did not seem particularly appealing to me as a life’s calling. And on a deeper, more philosophical level, I’ve always seen the role of rabbi as being about holding people together in community, building consensus, and creating spaces where all can feel accepted and welcome. The idea of regularly agitating my congregation felt at odds with this vision and deeply unsettled me.

Of course, what Rabbi Lebeau meant – and what I’ve come over the course of my career to understand to be true – is that most communities are enormously diverse religiously, politically, and otherwise, so if you’re managing to not make anyone unhappy it probably means that you’re avoiding taking a stand on anything of real substance and import. And this, I think, has only become more true (and more complicated!) over the last many years when many members of a community want their rabbis not only to speak to issues of Torah, prayer, and Jewish living but also to compelling social issues of the day. We notice, of course, that there’s often some amount of inconsistency here. When people **agree** with what their rabbi is saying, their rabbi is “providing moral leadership,” “bringing Jewish values to bear on current events,” and “saying the hard things that need to be said – even if not everyone likes it.” When people **don’t agree** with what their rabbi is saying, their rabbi is “pushing politics down our throats,” “dividing and alienating members of our community” and “should just stick to Torah.” Still, I think that many of us ultimately believe that religion only reaches its highest purpose when it helps us to better

think about and engage with the complicated and flawed world in which we live. And that's only become more true since the events of October 7th.

As members of this community will probably recognize, the words spoken from this bimah since October 7th have been strong and unequivocal in terms of voicing support for Israel – something that I'm very proud of. And as members of this community will also probably recognize, the words spoken from this bimah since October 7th have given far less voice to the suffering of the Palestinian people – something I'm not so proud of. For many of us, myself included, it has been devastating to see and hear the scenes out of Gaza: the almost 30,000 people killed, many of them children; the thousands more displaced from their homes, increasingly with nowhere left to go that feels safe and secure; the collapse of buildings and infrastructure that is leaving so many without food, medical care, housing and a way to make a living or even a life to imagine once, God willing, this conflict is finally over. At the beginning of the war, when we were still in shock about the massacre perpetrated by Hamas and the hundreds of innocent Israeli lives taken in the most barbaric and horrific of ways, it felt to me somehow insensitive to the pastoral needs of our own community to be focusing on the pain of others. And then, even as the months have gone by, it's sometimes felt like the suffering of the Palestinians is being emphasized so strongly everywhere else in our world, often to the exclusion of the suffering of Israelis, that maybe at this particular moment it's okay for us to turn inward and focus on our own. Most recently, I've been hesitant to confront the topic of the suffering of the Palestinian people because I'm not quite sure what the solution is: defeating an army of terrorists who build underground tunnels and use human shields makes it extraordinarily difficult to gain victory without an enormous loss of innocent life. But in addition to the fact that loving and caring for the vulnerable is a central value of Jewish tradition, and that showing indifference in the face of a humanitarian crisis is not the Jewish way, I've also been reminded recently that what is (and is not) said from the bimah impacts our own community in deep

and significant ways. In fact, this is one of the central lessons of our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Tetzaveh*.

Parashat Tetzaveh is the second of five Torah portions at the end of the Book of Exodus which recount with exacting precision the specifications of the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary used by the Israelites during their period of desert wandering. While the majority of these *parshiot* are dedicated to details of the *Mishkan* itself – length, width, and height requirements, fabrics to be used in its construction and materials for the various vessels contained within – the focus of *Tetzaveh* is on the priests who perform the work of the *Mishkan* and particularly on their clothing, special items worn while serving in this role. From ephod (vest) to robe, tunic, headdress and sash, all the sacred vestments of the priests are considered with exquisite thoughtfulness and detail. Among these is the *hoshen mishpat* (breast piece of decision) bearing twelve stones corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel, each engraved with its name. On the shoulder-pieces of the ephod there are likewise two stones, each bearing the name of six tribes of Israel.

For the most part, the classical commentators are interested in the order and placement of these names on the stones – whether it's by age, or matrilineal provenance, or the way the tribes are (later) configured around the Tent of Meeting. But this, I think, misses the central and stunning message of these garments: that in performing his sacred duties, the priest was literally carrying the community of Israel on his shoulders and wearing them over his heart. *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* imagines that the priest's bearing the stones and carrying the names served as a reminder to God – so that the Divine would look at the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and be inclined towards forgiveness on behalf of the people whose names he bore. But the Torah seems to indicate

that the stones and names were actually rather meant as a reminder to the priest himself, that he should have the needs and interests of the community in mind every time he spoke a word, made a decision, or performed a holy act. As it says in Exodus 28:29:

וְנָשָׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת־שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֹשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט עַל־לְבוֹ בְּבָאֹו אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְזִכְרוֹן לִפְנֵי־ה' תָּמִיד:

“Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breast piece of decision over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before God at all times.” What leaders say and do reflects not only upon them themselves but, indirectly, upon all those they serve as well. The weight of the stones mirrored the weight of responsibility the priests quite literally shouldered and held in their hearts.

The stones on the priestly garments also help to explain why Rabbi Lebeau’s dictum is so often true. When people don’t like what their rabbi is saying (or not saying), it often feels less like a simple difference of opinion and more like a painful, personal betrayal – that this person, who is supposed to speak in my name, has let me down. And because rabbis speak not only for themselves but, in many ways, as representatives of their communities, their words can send implicit messages about what kinds of ideas and opinions are “acceptable” (or “unacceptable”) within a communal context. Since October 7th I have been moved to see how much fervent support there is for Israel within our community – expressed through giving money and petitioning government officials, attending rallies, participating in missions, speaking out against anti-Zionism, planting lawn flags, buying Israeli products, supporting Israeli family members, sending children (and grandchildren) to the Israeli army, and so much more. As I have said many times, Israel needs us now more than ever. Standing in solidarity provides much needed *chizzuk* (strengthening) both physically and in terms of human spirit and morale.

Since October 7th, I have also seen that there has been a narrowing of the communal conversation around Israel, a narrowing that I fear I may unwittingly have contributed to, where voices of opposition to the Netanyahu government or concern over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza or questions about balancing the goal of safe return of hostages against the goal of eliminating Hamas have been shut down and made to feel unwelcome. Even amongst Israelis there is vigorous debate about these issues, and in our community, I hear them being raised by thoughtful, compassionate lovers of Israel who believe in her right to exist and to defend herself. More than one participant on our upcoming trip to Israel told me that they're going to stand with the **people** of Israel at this devastating time even as they vehemently oppose the current government and how it's handling this war. Others in our community, **because** of their love for Israel, are motivated to make sure that she remains faithful to her highest aspirations for democracy, justice, and concern for the safety and dignity of all people. These are not closeted anti-Zionists, trying to present themselves as pro-Israel while they secretly work against Jewish interests. They are, like all of us, trying to balance issues of security and protection with issues of moral integrity. While we may all come to different conclusions about these impossible conflicts, these are not voices that should be considered beyond the pale.

Support for Israel, even in these extraordinarily difficult times, cannot mean heterodoxy – not only because it's not ultimately good for Israel, which needs all different kinds of people with all different kinds of ideas to be invested in her success and thriving, but also because it's not good for the Jewish people who have always valued *machloket* (spirited and respectful debate) over conformity of thought. Diversity of opinion helps move groups towards best solutions, holds people in relationship with one another - even across difference, and ultimately creates more interesting and authentic communities where all can feel welcome regardless of their particular ideas or beliefs. Diversity of opinion also

means, a la Rabbi Lebeau, that we'll all probably feel angry (or alienated or under-represented or misunderstood) at least some of the time. That just means that we're doing our job well!

וְנִשָּׂא אֶהְרֹן אֶת־שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהִזְשֹׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט

May we, like Aaron, hold the names of our entire community over our hearts as we continue to walk through these difficult days.

Shabbat Shalom!

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