

VAYAKHEL (EXODUS 35:1-38:20)

Missing Yud = Missing YID!

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

The very thing that makes America great is tearing Israel apart.

There is a political party in Israel today that has gained power on the simple platform of rejection of the Torah and hatred for its adherents. The United States is great because it allows every person to practice his religion as he sees fit. All the secular Israelis want is the right to make their own definitions of who is a Jew, marry whomever they want, and shop 7 days a week. What is wrong with that?

(DISCLAIMER: If you are expecting to read a resolution to this problem, or a politically correct statement on this issue, you may want to click to another site. I offer no solution, just a thought that may provide some insight into this dilemma.)

The past several Torah Portions have dealt with the construction of the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle built in the desert. The nation responded generously to Moses' appeal for donations of materials. Silver and gold, expensive fabrics and supplies were donated by the masses. The donations came from the rich and the poor.

There is an interesting comment made about the precious stones that were required for the garments of the High Priest. He wore an *Ephod*, a type of apron that had two jewels on the shoulder strap, and a breastplate that had twelve stones. These 14 stones were donated by the *Nesi'im*, the Princes of each tribe.

The Torah tells us that *the Nesi'im brought the onyx stones, and the stones to be set, for the Ephod and the breastplate.* (Exodus, 35:27) Rashi points out that the word *Nesi'im*, Princes, is spelled differently than usual. The letter *Yud* is missing. While it doesn't really affect the pronunciation of the word, that's not the way it's supposed to be spelled.

(NOTE: For those sticklers for Hebrew grammar, there IS a minor change in pronunciation. When an "ee" sound is spelled with a *Yud*, it is pronounced like a long "e." When the *Yud* is missing, it is more like a short "i." Hence, the difference would be *Nesih-IHM*, as opposed to *Nesih-EEM*. For those of us who are less meticulous, the difference is moot.)

Rashi explains that the reason the word is spelled with a missing letter is to indicate that there was something lacking in their donation. When Moses let the word out that he was accepting contributions for building the Tabernacle, the twelve Tribal Princes, men of great wealth, offered to underwrite the project. They committed themselves to make up whatever shortfall there might be in communal donations. There was no shortfall. The Nation of Israel responded to the call, and in two days, Moses had more than he needed. There was nothing left for the Princes to donate except for the 14 stones.

Why are the *Nesi'im* criticized? Shouldn't they be praised for taking the initiative to insure that everything would be provided?

My Rebbe, Rabbi David Feinstein, *Shlit"a*, points to a Mishna in Tractate Avos (A.K.A. "Ethics of the Fathers". In listing four categories of charitable donors, the Mishna includes "*one who wishes to give himself, but wants others NOT to give; he begrudges others.*" Rabbi Feinstein suggests that by promising to make up the difference, the Princes were, in fact, DISCOURAGING the masses from giving. If people who were not particularly affluent knew that all the money would come in regardless of their own efforts, they would be less inclined to participate.

In other words, the Princes wanted to keep the Mitzvah for themselves.

When you love someone, you want everyone to share your love for them. In serving G-d, one should want OTHERS to serve G-d as well. In wanting to be the sole donors to the project, the Princes were, as the Mishna states, begrudging others. By wanting to be the major contributors, they wanted to serve G-d themselves, and not allow others to serve Him.

What business is it of mine whether or not YOU choose to serve G-d? Why can't we all live and let live?

This is a valid argument only if one views Torah as a quaint cultural choice of little genuine value. Do you like Fluffernutters? I love 'em. You don't? That's O.K. How about asparagus? I never touch the stuff. You like it? That's fine. Live and let live.

But what about the important things in life? Why can't we let "scientists" engage in human cloning? What business is it of mine if consenting adults do experiments that could, G-d forbid, create children with hideous deformities? Shouldn't I be allowed to drink and drive if I want to? And how about our good friend Saddam Hussein? Is it really our concern if a sovereign nation wants to amass nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons?

Obviously, this is different. You cannot compare an anthrax-tipped missile to a peanut butter and fluff sandwich. One is a personal decision and the other is a threat to others. Of course, there is no comparison.

Is Shabbos a personal choice, or does it affect others? Does it affect the life of the average religious Israeli if the local grocery store sells pork chops to Jews on Yom Kippur? Does a Saturday matinee in downtown Jerusalem affect the serenity of a Shabbos table in a religious neighborhood? Does the fact that one's fellow Jews are playing soccer on Saturday afternoon diminish his enjoyment of a hot Shabbos *Chulent*?!

It should. I observe Shabbos because the Master of the World expects us to. Expects **US** to. Can I force another Jew to observe Shabbos? No. **SHOULD** I force another Jew to observe Shabbos? No. But that doesn't change the fact that **WE ARE ALL SUPPOSED TO** observe Shabbos. It doesn't change the hurt I feel over the fact that many of my coreligionists don't **YET** appreciate the beauty of Shabbos

The Tribal Princes are taken to task because they were selfish. They wanted to be the ones doing the Mitzvah of building the Tabernacle. They should have been concerned to see to it that **EVERY** Jew joined in the Mitzvah.

Part of my obligation to serve G-d is the requirement to help others to see the depth and profundity and wealth of a Torah lifestyle. That's why I teach Torah. I can't force others to believe as I do, but I am certainly obligated to try. If **ONE** of my 121 (so far!) TorahTalk messages can reach **ONE** fellow Jew and inspire him to be more observant of **ONE** Mitzvah, it would justify all the effort.

Does that make me an evangelist? No, it makes me a Torah-observant Jew, trying to fulfill the Mitzvah of teaching others. Does that make me intolerant of other people's views? I am obligated to love my fellow man, even if I vehemently disagree with him. You can call that intolerant if you like. As I have stated previously on this website, tolerance is a virtue for those who have no principles.

What is the solution to the discord between religious and secular Jews in Israel? I wish I knew.

But this much I do know. The founders of the State of Israel recognized the significance of Torah as part of the lifeblood of that State. Even such anti-religious Jews as David Ben-Gurion saw the need for a "Religious Status Quo."

That status quo is being undermined. As our enemies threaten to destroy Israeli lives from without, new policies being proposed threaten to destroy Israel's Soul from within.

Israeli hero Ilan Ramon delivered a lecture from heaven to millions of Israelis. Holding a Torah scroll, Ramon, himself a secular Jew, declared that "it is very, very important to preserve our historical tradition, and I mean our historical and religious traditions."

We cannot force anyone to observe the Torah, nor should we. We cannot expect anyone to embrace values that they don't believe in. We should, however, keep one thing in mind:

Our entire claim to the Land of Israel is based upon the Torah. If the Torah is not what guides us, we may as well give it all to Arafat and move to Brooklyn.

Have a great Shabbos.

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