

Vayakhel-Pikudei: It's Not Over Until the Rabbis Sing

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

Once a year we - the congregational rabbis of the Israeli Masorti Movement - get a real treat: three days of intensive learning “outside the box.” The retreat is funded by an American Jewish family that loves Israel and feels it is very important to support the alternative Jewish voices here. This family supports rabbis of all kinds who are not supported by the government (i.e. the rabbinate).

This year's theme was the art of the Niggun. More precisely, the way in which a niggun is created, and the way in which a niggun creates a community.

Such an appropriate topic for Parashat Vayekhel-Pikudei! These parashot are combined on years that are not leap years, and they complete the book of Exodus.

Moshe descends from Mount Sinai for the second time, and he convenes the people - men, women and children. This inarticulate man tells them about the out-of-the-box learning he just experienced on the Mountain. He shares with them the art of the Mishkan: how to build a structure in which God's presence can reside. After 80 days of intensive spiritual architectural studies the internship begins.

It is a huge success. At the end of these two parashot a wondrous thing will happen: the Divine cloud will fill the Mishkan.

In order to really appreciate these parashot we need to relax our critical, modern reading of the ancient text. This year we are learning the writings of Maimonides in our Beit Midrash classes. The first of the three parts of the “Guide for the Perplexed” is primarily devoted to the way in which the Torah should be read. Maimonides is very clear about it: it should be read metaphorically.

So we have a rare opportunity - repeated yearly - to evaluate the various structures in our lives, both physical and spiritual. Does the Divine spirit reside in them, or is there spiritual and psychological wasteland?

Moshe, in spite of his speech impediment, gathered the People, and was able, in a miraculous way, to transmit the art of the Mishkan, the art of creating a presence.

Each time the entire congregation of Am Yisrael - men, women, and children - convene, amazing things happen. There are those who would say that the magic lays in the rare ability of a segmented nation to unite in such moments. But if the nation is so segmented (and it is!)

what enables these magical moments? What causes those moments of unity that bring the Divine into the world and light up the darkest corners?

This week I learned that one possible answer lies in the niggun. Not only in the niggun, but in the people who are singing it. The secret is in the existence of a wide variety of voices singing together! When those who can't carry a tune join with songbirds; when heavenly voices harmonize with those who croak along, the niggun created is one of unity. In turn, this unity creates a channel of communication with the heavens.

Until this week I thought that only Rabbi Nachman, together with Naomi Shemer, knew this secret. (I often quote "Shirat HaAsabim", the Song of the Weeds, whose words were written by the former and the tune by the latter.) In this week's retreat I learned that there are an endless number of transforming texts that deal with the importance of the niggun and of singing, but also with the magic created by a multitude of voices, even of a cacophony.

In retrospect this is somewhat "logical." Whether you believe in a God of infinity (the Kabbalistic approach) or in a God that is the totality of all there is (the Pantheistic and secular approach), all possible and existing voices are included. Therefore, only when all of these voices come together and are present - yes, even the tone deaf and the "frogs" - does God appear in the world.

We sang only one niggun the entire retreat - over and over and over, for three days, but we also studied quite a few elevating texts. Here is the translation of one out of many:

It is said of King David: When he completed the Book of Psalms he felt very proud. He said to the Master of the Universe: "Is there any in the world who can create psalms like me?" A frog came along and said to him: "Don't be so proud of yourself. I sing much more than you do, and my songs create three thousand words of divine wisdom." (from Yalkut Shimoni on Tehillim)

Yes, the voice of a frog praises the Source of life. It also relates wise fables. Is wisdom reserved for those who do not judge, do not compare, are not entrapped in a constant search for standards? As long as there is competition in the world - who is better? Who is more worthy of being heard? Who is wiser? Who is more correct - wisdom is blocked.

Three times in the Torah Moshe gathers all of Am Yisrael. And then, for a brief, magical time, there are no classes, no more and no less, no good or bad, no correct and incorrect.

There is only great humility.

Humility in the sense that every voice has the right and the obligation to be heard.

Humility (from the Hebrew root ה.נ.ע) meaning answer, as the cacophony of human singing is answered by the wisdom of songs in the heavens.

Humility, because the song of heavenly wisdom is none other than the magical echo of the human song that rises from below.

We will end with a translation of another text written by Rabbi Avraham Isaac Hacohen Kook on the power of human singing:

There are those who sing the song of their soul, and in their soul they find everything, all spiritual satisfaction. There are those who sing the song of the nation, beyond their personal circle, finding it not broad enough and not ideally situated, and aspire greatly to heaven, and become one with the gentle love of Knesset Yisrael, and sing its songs with it, grieve its difficulties... and search with love and with wisdom the inner, Divine spirit. And there are those who go even further, beyond the borders of Israel to sing the song of humanity. They expand greatly the grandeur of humanity and of its divine spirit... (from Orot Hakodesh)

Thank you to all of the good people who believe in pluralism, whose vision and financial support enabled us to get out of the box in order to sing one single song for three days so as to expand our hearts and our hearing and to learn how to enable all human voices to echo in our hearts.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha