

VAYAKHEIL/PEKUDE Exodus 35:1-40:38

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This Shabbat we read two Torah portions, both Vayakheil or “assembled”, meaning that “Moses Assembled the children of Israel”, and Pekude or “accounts”, meaning “These are the accounts of the building of the Tabernacle”. They are the final portions of the book of Exodus. In the portion Vayakheil, Moses reminds the people of the commandment to observe the Sabbath, emphasizing that no work is to be done on that day. Then Moses asks the Israelites to donate gifts of gold, silver, copper, precious stones, fine linen, wood, oil, or spices to be used for building the mishkan, or “sanctuary.” The skilled craftsmen, Bezalel and Oholiab, are selected to perform and oversee this building of the sanctuary. So many people offer to bring gifts, that Moses needs to tell them to stop bringing any more donations. In the portion, Pekude, it describes how they kept records of the construction of the mishkan, and all the donations given by the Israelites.

The importance of keeping the Sabbath is mentioned 12 times in the Torah. There is a story that was written by the Rabbis that says that after God created the heavens and earth, and placed the people of Israel in their land, the Torah came to God with a complaint. “O God,” said the Torah, “what will become of me when the Israelites are busy every day of the week with their occupations?” God answered, “I am giving them the Sabbath, and they will devote themselves on that day of rest to studying Torah.” (Exodus Rabbah)

The ancient Rabbis understood that Sabbath was meant to be a time for reviewing and examining important lessons of Torah, just as we still do today. We take time to think about ethical challenges, and the perplexing issues facing human beings, and try to find insight and understanding of ourselves, of others and of the world in which we live. We refrain from work in order to find the wisdom from the Torah and how we can interpret it in today’s world. We sometimes think only about what we can’t do on Shabbat, but in my opinion, it is more important to think of what we should do on Shabbat.

This is very relevant right now, as we are navigating our lives during the Coronavirus. Even as we are “commanded” to remain in our homes until this epidemic is over, we can still observe Shabbat, we can still connect with each other as Jews, we can still study Torah and make meaning of it, especially in this time of isolation and possibly loneliness.

There are several times in the Torah that tell us of isolation of those who were ill. Of course, back then, it was considered something that happened to people only if they sinned, and they needed to pray and follow the instructions of the priest in order to be healed and to return to the community. Today, we are being isolated in order to keep others from becoming sick, and so it is important to follow the directions of the medical institutions and our government, in order to keep ourselves safe, others safe, and make sure we will end this pandemic as soon as possible. The sooner we stop spreading it, the sooner we will end it.

Therefore, we can take this time to ponder the Torah, the ethics of how we behave during this time, and how we can help others, too.

We learn in Pirkei Avot 1:2 about Gemilut Chasadim-Acts of Loving Kindness: "The world is sustained by three things: Torah (study), worship and acts of lovingkindness." We have been doing the first two of these tonight, and now we talk about the third.

Maimonides taught us in his "Guide for the Perplexed: "All ethical principles concern the mutual relations between a person and another person, and are given for the benefit of society. Imagine a person who is alone and has no connection whatever with anyone else; none of that person's ethical qualities would be exercised or needed. They are necessary and useful only when a person comes into contact with others..."

Maimonides understood that we need to continue our contact with each other and be concerned with each other person to person right now and also as a society. We need to help each other at this time so people do not feel isolated or lonely. Even though we cannot be physically in contact with others, thankfully, today we can phone call, facebook chat, video call, ZOOM conference, or Skype with each other. We can reach out to others.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book, "God in search of Man, said: "Living is not a private affair of the individual. Living is what man does with God's time, what man does with God's world."

Our Board members and I have begun reaching out to all of our members to make sure they are okay. It is possible that some of our members may get sick, some may need to especially isolate themselves because they are in an older age group and are particularly susceptible to the disease and its severity and some of us may be affected financially by this, too. We are commanded in Leviticus 19:32 about "Hiddur p'nay zakain" or "Respect the Elderly". We are told: "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the elderly." Therefore, please reach out to people who are older and are afraid to go out, and may be very lonely, as well. Let them know you are there for them and ask them if they need anything.

Genesis 18:1 tells us we must visit the sick or Bikkur Cholim. This may not be possible at this time, but we can visit on the phone or video chat with people who are ill and offer our help. Even if we can't be in close contact with people who are ill, we can leave food, medicine or supplies for them at their door.

If at any time any of you need food, medicine or supplies delivered, etc., or simply feel lonely and need someone to talk to, we are here to help. Of course, I may not be able to take care of everything by myself, so I am asking for volunteers who are younger than 60 who might be able to help in these areas, to let me know.

Torah also teaches us in Leviticus 19:9 & 10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger." These are worrisome times for people who have been laid off and have no pay checks or salaries at this time. They may need help to pay rent/mortgage/bills or to buy food and medicine. If you fall into this category, please let us know. Also, if you are able to help others financially to help others pay for these, please consider sending checks to the Temple to go into my discretionary fund or the mensch fund, so we can give people some relief confidentially. Besides helping our own congregants, I know there is a need to help feed school children who are now home and don't receive free lunches, the homeless shelters have also sent out a call for food or funds to help feed their residents.

These are needs that may become a problem especially in the coming weeks and months. We are reminded in this portion that those whose hearts are willing and able, should donate to a holy cause. If you are in a position to help with this, please do whatever you can. I will also try to find out which organizations you can send funds directly to and get that out by next week with their names and addresses. It is in our blood to help each other whenever we can, and I know that we will do our best in that way as both Americans and Jews.

In Genesis 28, we learned that Jacob left Beer-Sheba, and went toward Haran. He dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And Adonai was standing beside him and said, "I am Adonai, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.... Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go.... I will not leave you." Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it!" God is with us as we pray together in this sanctuary and in our homes, in our interactions with each other, whether in person or by technology, in our actions and how we help those who need it.

The prophet Isaiah taught us that "Israel is to become a light to the nations" an agent who transmits the word of God to the peoples of the earth. It is up to us as Jews to remind everyone of their obligation to help each other, especially in such a time as this.

I thank you for your caring of others and of our community as we go through this together.

And so I end with this prayer:

Eternal One: Bless all who have come to pray together with me in this sacred place. Our members, our family, and our friends healthy. Give our Doctors, nurses, medical workers and researchers the strength and knowledge to find ways to heal those who are sick and protect others from becoming sick. Please safeguard our State, our country and the world and protect the lives and livelihoods of every one of its citizens. May all who are in need find it from the help of others. We pray that this crisis will end soon and that lives and livelihoods will be spared.

As we end the book of Exodus, it is customary to say: "Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazeik"- "Be strong, be strengthened and may we strengthen one another." Kein Yehi Ratzon- may this be God's will. And let us say: Amen