

Creating Space for the King

By: Benji Zoller, May 23, 2015–Parshat Beshalach 5776

Friday, December 11, 2015 was a day that will be marked in the hearts and souls of the students of Yavneh Academy of Dallas as one of the greatest day in school history. Not only was it Chanukah, but the Judaic staff decided to hold a special concert to celebrate and raise the ruach of the student body. Ask anyone who was there, what the concert did was much more than that.

Led by the amazingly talented and fun Happie Hoffman and Eric Hunker, the some hundred students in attendance sang songs ranging from those of King David to Bill Withers to Wiz Khalifa. Arm locked in arm, the voices and emotions of joy and unity soared far beyond the walls of the Beit Midrash. And, though, as Eric mentioned, the goal of the concert was to "make a moment," these moments were not instantaneous but enduring.

Listening to the recording of the concert over and over again – the hearts and souls of my classmates singing as one student body – I am reminded of what it means to be a member of a Jewish day school and institution like Yavneh. Though people come from different backgrounds and religious preferences, together we make up the school. This I discovered not only in the sound of the voices, but also in the words being sung, words that actually appear in the Parshat HaShavua about three weeks from now and the concluding line from Ashrei.

"וְעָשׂוּ לִי, מִקְדָּשׁ; וְשִׁכַנְתִּי, בְּתוֹכָם...וְאַנְחֵנוּ נְבָרֵךְ יְיָ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם" (Shemot 25:8 & Tehillem 115:18). Literally translated as, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them...But we will bless HaShem from this time forth and for ever," the song when sung in English takes a slightly different approach. Instead of the exact translations, it uses the words: "O Lord, prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. And with thanksgiving, I'll be a living Sanctuary for You!"

In this week's parsha, Parshat Beshalach, the Jews make their great and mighty exodus from Egypt. However, before long the Egyptians chase after them, threatening to return them to their slavery. Trapped between their enemy and the sea, God, by the hand of Moshe, splits the sea and the Jews easily cross. The Egyptians, on the other hand, are drowned. Elated at the witnessing of their oppressors sinking to their doom, all of Bnei Yisrael join together, miraculously, in song – known as Az Yashir, which is said daily in tefilla. Overwhelmed by the greatness of God they chant, "The Eternal's strength and His vengeance were my salvation; This is my God, and I will glorify Him (וְאֶנְהוּ); my father's God and I will exalt him!" (Shemot 15:2).

Confused as to how all of Bnei Yisrael, even in their low state, were able to see God so clearly, the Mechilta DeRebi Yishmael paints a picture. When there is an entourage led by a king, the people around them want to look around and point out who the king is. However, it's quite difficult. He too is flesh and blood; he too looks like all the others. But here, at the splitting of the sea, the King was no mere mortal, He was God. The people saw Him, recognized Him, and praised him.

Interesting, however, is the way in which they do the act of glorifying God. What does it mean that they "will glorify Him?" One explanation could be a contribution described later on in the Torah: truma. God tells Moshe to "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them take for Me truma, from every man whose heart motivates him you shall take My truma" (Shemot 25:2). Rashi teaches that the language used to describe the truma is one of volunteerism. The act of bringing truma is similar to bringing someone a present solely out of the kindness of one's heart.

The Hiktiv HaKabbala, on this topic, presents a beautiful idea. When someone gives a gift to an important person, the one giving the gift feels a greater honor than the receiver of the gift for he was able to make the honorable receiver happy. Giving a gift to God, in this sense, would be all the more so. God, who is the Creator of all, is also the Owner of all. This might explain why the Shla teaches that God miraculously adjusted each individual's truma. When someone was *willing* to donate a lot a truma, even if they had a little to give, the Shla explains that God blessed their portion and it grew larger.

But what's so important essential truma and the act of glorifying God?

Onkelos, Ibn Ezra, Rashi, and Ramban all explain that וְאֶנְוָהוּ means "I will glorify Him" in the sense that Bnei Yisrael "will build God a Sanctuary." In fact, Rashi teaches, truma is a portion of a person's belongings set aside for a higher purpose. The primary application of this throughout the Torah would primarily be for the building of the Mishkan – the first physical Sanctuary of God.

However, the question should be asked: What is a sanctuary and why is it so crucial to the Jewish people's connection with God?

Malbim teaches on the phrase "This is my God" that the Jews at the splitting of the sea felt God. They understood Him so well that they could point to a certain spot in nature and identify God. Not only that, but they could look within themselves and within others and realize that He dwells within each person as a sanctuary. Thus, not only must one acknowledge that God is the God of their fathers' or ancestors', but it also their personal God who guides them along their own journey.

The way to ensure it this understanding, explains Rav Hirsch, is to make oneself a sanctuary for God. This, says Rav Hirsch, is the greatest sanctuary: a human being who, similar to truma (which has the root וָרָם, meaning to uplift), must raise themselves up and allow themselves to seek God in all things, especially themselves.

A sanctuary, I would therefore define, is an environment, a location, an attitude, and/or a vibe which enables a person come close to God. How can one create this space? The answer, I believe, is found in the Mechilta DeRebi Yishmael who asks how can a person, a creation, make something *beautiful* (another translation of וְאֶנְוָהוּ) for God, the Creator? This is done, it explains, by doing additional mitzvot in ways that emulate God. By emulating God one grasps the virtues of patience, people, and themselves. They create an atmosphere for themselves and others which is one of joy, productivity, friendliness, and understanding.

"O Lord, prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. And with thanksgiving, I'll be a living Sanctuary for You!"

Every single person has the potential to achieve such a state. Whereas some find it through meditation, others do through prayer or action. In all honesty though, it doesn't matter. To each individual, there is a unique way to find their sanctuary – one special and meaningful to them. However, each path begins with the same journey: taking the first step to opening the heart to giving – in whatever form it may be – to God. The entourage has arrived, now it's time to spot the king.

Shabbat Shalom!

Benji Zoller – Siddhartha

Quote for Shabbos: “One must find the source within one's own Self, one must possess it. Everything else was seeking -- a detour, an error.” – Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*