

VAYAKHEL -- MAKING A CONGREGATION AND A COMMUNITY
a sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor
in honor of the Installation of Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman
as rabbi of Mt Sinai Congregation in Cheyenne, Wyoming
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Long ago as a senior in high school, when I had dreams of entering the life of the theatre, I got involved in a production of Shakespeare's "A Mid-Summer Night's Dream." Much energy went into the rehearsals, the construction of the sets including a most beautiful forest set, costumes were built, lines were learned and scenes were blocked. I had the role of Quince, and one of my best friends played Bottom. With a month to go before curtain, rehearsals began to drag and tedium set in. A plan was hatched to enliven the rehearsals and this play's Quince and Bottom began to write their own lines, restage scenes and drive the director crazy. As the rest of the cast and crew joined in the scheme, with each day of rehearsal, the pranks would get more and more interruptive, until -- in a rage of anger -- the director stormed out of the theatre screaming threats of the show's cancellation and mumbling about better ways to spend his time. After ten minutes of sustained laughter by the cast and crew, a stunning realization came over us -- maybe we had gone too far; maybe he really wasn't coming back.

On our own now, some suggested that we return to rehearsal and try to make up for the lost time. And so we began, but there was little coherence to our work. Soon it became evident that the show could not go on without our director. A small delegation was appointed to find him and cajole him to come back. Obviously, the two original instigators were sent out and we had to repent, beg, plead, flatter, promise and listen to twenty minutes of lectures centering on what awful ungrateful people we were. Having gotten that off his chest, the director decided to return to the cheers and applause of a grateful and repentant cast and crew. In minutes lines were delivered with feeling, sets and lights came together and the final weeks of rehearsal led to a well-received show. In fact, we accomplished more after the incident with the director, and the cast and crew never felt closer than in the days after our reinstatement to grace. It might even be said, that the play was better for our fall, for when we rose, we came together as a family.

This memory came back to me when I examined this week's Torah Portion. There are four Torah portions that deal with the building of the tabernacle culminating with this

week's parasha. However, they are not continuous. Yesterday's portion seems to interrupt with the tale of the Golden Calf. The people have finally been released from Egyptian bondage, they traveled together toward a Promised Land, witnessed great events at Mt Sinai, heard of the greatness that will come to them -- and then when Moses disappears in protracted negotiations with the Holy One, they pine away for a tangible symbol. Aaron acquiesces, the people are relieved, and they start the party dancing around Eycl HaZahav, the Golden Calf.

Moses hears from God, that maybe it was time to mosey on back, because the people were not behaving. Moses witnesses the scene and in his anger smashes the tablets and plans are halted for the construction of the tabernacle. God offers Moses the opportunity to wipe out all the people and start over again with just Moses. Moses considers and then he regains his composure and asks if God will forgive the people. God says those words that we repeat on every Yom Kippur -- Salachti c'd'varecha, I have pardoned according to your request.

And so to this week's portion -- VAYAKHEL. We read, "Moses gathered the people together as a congregation to build the tabernacle." The letters K-H-L are the root of the word Kehila, or congregation. The same word K-H-L (in a passive form) is used when the Children of Israel gathered around the golden calf -- the difference is that when they worshiped the calf, they gathered themselves. But, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf debacle, when it was time to create the holy tabernacle, the word appears in an active form because they were gathered together by a common vision articulated by Moses and Bezelel, the chief architect.

Once unified in their vision and their mission, they were asked to contribute the materials necessary to create the tabernacle. So unified in purpose, so dedicated to their task, the materials literally flowed out of the community and into Bezelel's warehouse, that after a while there was simply too much than there could possibly be used. The people were too generous. Moreover, the tabernacle was not created from material that came from taxes or levies -- the material came from free-will offerings, offerings of their hearts.

The Torah tells us that the gifts came from three types of people: those of willing hearts (nadeev libo), those whose hearts compelled them (n'sa'oo libo) and those whose spirit compelled them (nadvah rucho). Despite the later rabbinic emphasis on action above intent -- the Torah text here clearly tells us that in the creation of the tabernacle -- spirit or intent must be equally married to action -- and when this happens, an abundance of riches amasses.

We remark upon this because, amazingly enough, there is more detail in the Torah about the creation of the tabernacle than there is about the creation of the world. It is the tabernacle, created by human hands, which is supposed to be a microcosm of the creation of the world.

What is the importance of the Tabernacle? RMBM said that the tabernacle was built in the wilderness to wean the children of Israel from the idolatry of Egypt. Likewise, our synagogues must be places that wean us from the idolatries of society around us. In the first lines of the portion, immediately after Moses gathered the Children of Israel into a congregation, they are warned to observe the laws of Shabbat. Is this another interruption of the text? I think not: the laws of Sabbath at the beginning of the portion make sense. The Sabbath is our sanctuary in time as the tabernacle is our sanctuary in space. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue, but to be in accord." (The Sabbath, pg. 3)

From Sefat Emet -- Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, picking up an idea from the Midrash tells us that the section on Shabbat teaches us how to become a congregation -- a holy community. He charges us to make congregations learn and live Shabbat and the festivals, for on those days, the Children of Israel are indeed a single entity. It is because of the turmoil of the weekdays that the congregation is torn apart. From this, we can add that when a congregation functions no differently than institutions of the work-a-day world, turmoil ensues. But when a congregation acts as if the sanctuary of time - Shabbat - dictates the way the congregation functions, then it is brought together as a unified whole.

What is it like when a whole community gathers to do the sacred work of building the tabernacle? Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica in the 19th century taught: In the building of the tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his or her neighbor. At first, each skilled individual did his or her own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that the work was extraordinary. Afterward, they saw how their several contributions to the "service" of the tabernacle were integrated - all the boards, the sockets, the curtains, and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each one of them had depended on the other. Then they understood that what they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the Tabernacle. They had merely joined in completing its master building plans, so that, as we read in the portion, "It came to pass that the Tabernacle was one" (Exodus 36:13). Moreover, the one who made the holy ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had made only the courtyard tent pegs.

With this wonderful and deeply scholarly exposition of this week's Torah portion, what messages can be teased out for this community and this rabbi? I would like to suggest the following. First, as the Tabernacle could only be built with the free will offerings of the members of the community, so too this community can only grow and flourish when hearts and minds are engaged. And what should engage the members of this congregation? Bringing the message of Social Justice to the wider community. At the end of the work of Creation, God said, "This is very good" - God didn't say "It's perfect or it's done" When Humanity was created - we were created in the likeness and image of God - and what was the image of God? God-As-Creator. Therefore, we were created to be creators - and what do we create? We pick up where God left off - we do the work of making this "Very Good" place better - we must do the work of Tikun Olam - repairing the world. And we repair the world by seeking justice and equality. When humanity was created, we learn from the Midrash, that God collected every color of dust from all over the world and used that to form the first person - so that no person could say, my skin color is better than yours. And every person - regardless of social standing, religious belief, sexual orientation, political affiliation, level of educational achievement - was created in the image of God. We have our work cut out for us to root out prejudice, and counter intolerance with understanding. A group of individuals brought together to make common cause becomes a community.

Deriving from this understanding, we are compelled to reach across boundaries of religious differences to create opportunities for dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is to break down misconceptions and misunderstandings - to find the things that bind us - and to celebrate our differences. When we marvel at the work of creation, it is clear to see that God did not create one kind of bird, one kind of tree, one kind of insect.... God created a multiplicity of these forms. And if we say that God was behind creation, then we can conclude that these varieties are the intention of the Creator. And our religious differences compel us to seek knowledge and learn from one another while respecting our traditions and beliefs. Those who insist that they have the only truth and deny others their faith and belief fly in the face of what this remarkable world represents: a remarkable mosaic that harmonizes the differences without turning everything in to relative sameness. Like a jigsaw puzzle, every piece is unique and colorful - the goal of putting the puzzle together is not to take out scissors and cut off the edges and make the pieces the same shape - it is to find the ways that the pieces fit together. And as the puzzle is completed a new image is seen - and yet, not one single puzzle piece ever gave up its uniqueness - it just found a way to work with every other piece. Our interfaith dialogue show lead us the same way - to allow us a common language of understanding, sharing our lessons with one another and appreciating our different outlooks. We do this for the sake of SHALOM - not peace - but wholeness, as the completed jigsaw puzzle demonstrates.

This congregation has a unique opportunity - to start a new chapter under the leadership and guidance of its new rabbi, my friend and classmate - Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman. And as Rabbi Karz-Wagman strengthens the Mt Sinai congregation, the whole community can grow stronger and more integrated.

And so from Torah we learn about making holy communities -- true congregations: communities must rise and sometimes fall together, but a vision and a mission can keep them together. A congregation must reach out for holiness, living in holy time, sheltered by holy space. And when vision drives a community to action, the spirit engendered should allow all to feel of equal importance, of equal worth. The Torah concludes, that when the children of Israel completed the building of the tabernacle, "it was one." And so we bring our gifts, our time and our labor to the building of our sacred communities of faith. We pray that, like our ancestors, we, too, may learn to become one.

And may God bless Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman as he leads this congregation and may this congregation help to build this community, so that when folks talk about Cheyenne, they can say - what a remarkably diverse but wonderfully unified place it is.