



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Trumah or Tetzaveh

SPECIAL EDITION

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 11, 2011
Trumah or Tetzaveh

Special Edition Sermon

World Upheaval and You



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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ABSTRACT

What are we to make of the recent upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt (which are now spreading to Jordan)? How are they going to play out across the rest of the Middle East and the world? Should we be concerned? How will they impact us and Israel? What does the future hold?

It is too early to tell the immediate effects of the current uprising in the ancient land of the pharaohs, but we Jews, as the oldest nation in that part of the world, have a unique birds' eye perspective on the meaning of these events. Because our holy texts have pretty much predicted this would happen – not specifically perhaps but certainly in global terms – and have also explained why and what we should do about it.

[FOR TRUMAH SERMON]

For example, the Midrash, commenting on this week's Torah reading, explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram's skins – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. And that despite their dominance, the end of the story will be – as the verse continues – “oil for the lamp” that will illuminate our path leading to the Final Redemption.

[FOR TETZAVEH SERMON]

For example, the Midrash, commenting on this week's Torah reading which describes the ritual lighting the lamps of the menorah, equates its light with the light of the Final Redemp-

tion at the end of days. And it also explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram’s skins – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome.

What is the connection between these empires and the materials with which the Sanctuary was created? For one, these materials were melded, beaten, and shaped into holy objects, thus taking something which is materially coarse and refining it for a holy, spiritual purpose.

The Midrash further explains that, in this fashion, God was telling the Israelites that by building a Sanctuary for Him – so that He can dwell in their midst – they will be able to survive despite persecution by these brutal empires. And not only survive, but thrive and transform them and the world as well. All this has happened, and these empires have vanished while the Jewish people remain.

But the Jewish people have a job to do – to be a “light unto the nations,” in the words of the Prophet Isaiah.

Just how – practically speaking, and here and now – is the subject of this sermon.

TROUBLE IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS: WORLD UPHEAVAL AND YOU

1. Communications History (Joke)

Digging to a depth of 1,000 meters last year, French scientists found traces of copper wire dating back 1,000 years. The French came to the conclusion that their ancestors had a telephone network centuries ago.

Not to be outdone by the French, British scientists dug to a depth of 2,000 meters. Shortly thereafter British newspapers reported: “Archaeologists have found traces of a 2,000-year-old fiber-optic cable in England and have concluded that our ancestors had an advanced high-tech digital communications network a thousand years earlier than the French.”

One week later, Israeli newspapers reported the following: “After digging as deep as 5,000 meters in a Jerusalem marketplace, Jewish archeologists have found absolutely nothing. They thus concluded that 5,000 years ago the Jews were using wireless.”

Now, you don’t need wireless or Facebook or Twitter to know that the world is in an upheaval today. But what are we to make of the most recent events in Tunisia and Egypt? And how are they going to play out across the rest of the Middle East and the world? How will they impact us and Israel? What does the future hold?

All the media – journalists, commentators, pundits, bloggers – are weighing in on the immediate and short-term consequences of this turmoil. But there is a bigger picture – a broader perspective.

2. Revolution in Egypt

When Chou En-Lai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China, was asked by Western journalists to assess the impact of the American and French Revolutions, he quipped, “It’s too early to tell.”

So, it is too early to tell the immediate effects of the current uprising in the ancient land of the pharaohs.

One thing is sure though, we Jews, as the oldest nation in this part of the world, have a unique historical perspective on the meaning of these events. Because our holy texts have pretty much predicted this would happen – not specifically perhaps but certainly in global terms – and have also explained why and what we should do about it.

I do not mean to brag about Jewish prophecy or prescience. What I do want to do is to help us all make sense of these events and find out how exactly we should respond. And this is only possible if we are able to see the bird's eye view, rather than merely adopting the myopic vision of here and now.

3. Lighting the Lamp

[OPENING FOR TRUMAH SERMON]

For example, the Midrash,¹ commenting on this week's Torah reading, explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram's skins² – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt: Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. And that despite their dominance, the end of the story will be – as the verse continues – “oil for the lamp” that will illuminate our path leading to the Final Redemption.

[OPENING FOR TETZAVEH SERMON]

The opening of this week's Torah reading discusses the lighting of the lamps of the menorah with pure olive oil. Why does the Torah single this out among all the other rituals of the Sanctuary already outlined in last week's reading?

The Midrash³ helps us answer this question by equating the light of the menorah with the light of the Final Redemption in end of days. And it further explains that the various elements used in the building of the Sanctuary – in particular the gold, silver, copper and reddened ram's skins⁴ – correspond to the four major kingdoms/empires of history – which grew out of the root archetypal kingdom of Egypt. These four

¹Midrash Tanchuma (Terumah) 7. See *Shemot Rabba* 35:5.

²Exodus 25:3-4.

³Midrash Tanchuma (Terumah) 7. See *Shemot Rabba* 35:5.

⁴Exodus 25:3-4.

were: Babylonia (corresponding to gold), Persia (corresponding to silver), Greece (corresponding to copper) and Rome (corresponding to red-dened skins, for Rome was also known as Edom, which means “red.”)

[CONTINUE FOR BOTH SERMONS]

What is the connection between these empires and the materials with which the Sanctuary was created? Indeed, two of these empires (Babylon and Rome) actually *destroyed* the Temples. So why would their rise be intimated in the materials used to *build* the sanctuary?!

For one, the materials were melded, beaten, and shaped into holy objects, thus taking something which is materially coarse and refining it for a holy, spiritual purpose.

The Midrash further explains that, in this fashion, God was telling the Israelites that by building a Sanctuary for Him – so that He can dwell in their midst – they will be able to survive despite persecution by these brutal empires. And not only survive, but thrive and transform them and the world as well. The Midrash states:

[God told the people:] “Although you will see how these four formidable empires will glorify and aggrandize themselves and rise against you, know that I will plant redemption even in your subjugation. [And you will know this] from the oil for the lamp,⁵ which refers to the light of the Messiah.”

This explains why the Torah singles out this ritual to highlight the implied message of hope, and to emphasize God’s promise that the Jews will prevail over all the empires.

Indeed, we have prevailed. We are still here but every one of these empires is long gone. But the Final Redemption and the utopia of the Messianic Era – when all nations are supposed to beat their swords into ploughshares – has not yet come.

Aah, but it is in the making.

⁵This is another one of the offerings that the Jews brought for the Sanctuary (Exodus 25:6)

4. Promise to Abraham

Just how all that is playing out today as part of the Messianic process leading to world peace is illuminated by the prophecy given Abraham concerning his descendants.

As we know, Abraham – the Hebrew – was the “father of many nations.” His immediate descendants included: Ishmael (the progenitor Arab/Muslim people), Esau (also known as Edom, the progenitor of the Western/Christian world), and Jacob (also known as Israel, the progenitor of the Jews).

Before any of them were born, God made a covenant with Abraham, which the Torah calls “the covenant between the pieces.”⁶ In the accompanying ceremony, Abraham was directed to split in half the carcass of a heifer, a goat and a ram and arrange the halves on a U-shaped altar. Then a fire passed between the pieces sealing the covenant.

As this was happening, Abraham (then still called Abram) was overcome by a terrible foreboding. This is how the Torah tells this dramatic story:

As the sun was setting, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep dark dread fell upon him. And [God] said to Abram: “Know for sure that your descendants will strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed. But I will finally bring judgment against the nation that enslaves them, and they will then leave with great wealth...”

The sun set, and it became very dark. A smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between the halves of the animals. On that day God made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.”⁷

What was the “deep dark dread” that fell upon Abraham? The Midrash explains that Abraham was shown the future great empires that would flower out of the Egyptian empire and that would control the world,

⁶ Genesis, chapter 15.

⁷ Genesis 15:1-21.

bringing terror to it, each in their own way: the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman empires and also the Ishmaelite empire.⁸

The great 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria (known as the Ari) explains that these empires represent the different stages of refinement that we achieve throughout the generations.⁹ Everything in our material existence contains divine sparks of spiritual energy, and we are charged with the mission to redeem and elevate these sparks. This is how we refine the material universe and transform it into its true purpose: a vehicle for spiritual expression and a home for the Divine.

Beginning with the enslavement by the Egyptian empire – the archetype and root of all the exiles and empires – each subsequent empire symbolizes another stage of refinement in integrating Godliness into the material world. The process concludes with the refinement of the last two powers, Esau/Edom (i.e. the Western world) and Ishmael (the Arab/Muslim world), which will usher in the Messianic Era. At that time there will be no more destruction and terror, and all children of Abraham will serve the One God in peace and harmony.

5. The Message to Us

Why was Abraham shown this vision? In order for him to share its message with his children, so that we, at whatever point in history we may be living, should know that the events in our lives are part of a long historical process.

Even as “deep dark dread” strikes us, we must always hold onto Abraham’s vision, that all our journeys and challenges are part of a bigger process, and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

And that light is not, as cynics may quip, the light of the oncoming train...

Indeed, the message of light and that very promise is emphasized in Torah’s description of the ritual lighting of the lamps of the menorah.

⁸ Mechilta Yitro 9. *Bereishis Rabba* 44:17. Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer, ch. 28.

⁹ Likkutei Torah and Sefer HaLikkutim, *Parshat Ki Teitzei*.

This vision and promise is what the Jewish people held onto during their long hard years in Egyptian slavery.

By the way, a recent Facebook posting by an Israeli refers to the massive quantity of Egyptian architecture which was built by the hands of Jewish slaves:

*Dear Egyptian rioters,
Please don't damage the pyramids.
We will not rebuild.
Thank you.*

[In the terrible time of Egyptian slavery and] indeed, throughout all the persecutions of history, this vision and promise is what the Jews held onto, and it is this dream that allowed them to prevail and thrive.

This vision continues not only to give us strength and fortitude during difficult times, but also to give us direction how to proceed. Understanding the different dynamics underlying current events empowers us to be proactive. It empowers us to take concrete steps in order to refine that particular dimension of experience.

As we see the Middle East undergoing a major upheaval, as we stand uncertain about what lies ahead if us, now is the time to embrace and connect to Abraham's vision. Faith is the most powerful resource we can access when we feel threatened – faith to firmly hold onto God's words that we shall prevail and “emerge with great wealth.”

6. The Special Role of Egypt

Egypt, of course, plays a special role in all this, as it is the root and archetype of all the other empires. Indeed, the Midrash states that Egypt and all the empires will, at the end of days, bring “gifts” to the Messiah, symbolizing their transformation from adversaries to allies.

This also explains a strange episode in the life of Jacob. When Jacob and his family went to Egypt during the famine, Jacob planted cedars in Egypt. The Midrash says that he prophetically foresaw that their woods

would be needed for the building of the Sanctuary, God's home among his children. Since there was no such wood in the wilderness where the Israelite slaves would be when commanded to build the Sanctuary, Jacob instructed his sons to take the wood with them when they left Egypt!

Why go to such lengths?

Because the goal of their stay in Egypt was transform it into a force of good – cedars planted in pagan Egypt ended up serving the one true God as components of His Sanctuary!

7. The Big Plan

As we witness today the upheavals in Egypt and the other Middle Eastern lands, where battles have been raging since biblical times, we must remember that this is part of the big plan – and that this plan had been shown to and foreseen by our ancestors. For the balance of the universe must be realigned and restored, and the world must make its peace with God and its higher calling.

The end of the story, as understood by Jewish prophets, is that all the empires will be tamed and will discover their true purpose. This happened with Edom (or Rome which is today's Western world) which for centuries terrorized its neighbors. It is now a bastion of freedom, championing human rights and adhering to the biblical principles of virtue and justice – the very principles which were pioneered by Abraham and formalized at Sinai.

It has been said that the Ishmaelite/Muslim world has been on vacation from history for the past 50 years, or maybe for the past 500 years. For all their virtues, the religions of the world have to mature and learn to integrate their faith with contemporary life. As long as they don't, the two will clash. As a result, the Middle East is today – as it has been from the beginning of time – the front of the war between passionate faith and secular modernity.

Just as the other children of Abraham have done, the descendants of Ishmael will need to learn how to peacefully integrate their deep faith with modern life, and with tolerance and coexistence. The time to find enlightenment is now. The time to embrace the path of Abraham, “the father of many nations,” is now. Let us hope and pray that everyone sees the current turmoil as a step forward in that direction.

8. What Can We Do?

Meanwhile, what can we – each of us – do other than watch events unfold? Can we do anything to expedite the process of global peace and redemption?

Yes, we can craft and build our own Sanctuary for God. We can use our own physical resources – the gold, silver, copper, and reddened skins of our material lives – and thus transform matter into spirit and the mundane into divine. Our Sanctuary, our sacred space, will then radiate outwards and illuminate our surroundings as did the lamp of the menorah once upon a time. The menorah symbolizes the light of the redemption. We can make sure it shines brightly, right now ... right here.

This is what it means to be a “light unto the nations” as the Prophet Isaiah told us we must be.¹⁰

But to truly be a “light unto the nations,” we must know what it means.

So, the first thing we can do in these trying times is to truly live with the times by carefully studying the words of the weekly Torah reading and personalizing and integrating its words into our lives. By doing so we can connect to Abraham’s strength and God’s promise to him.

The second thing that we can do is not be a passive bystanders waiting for something to happen. By recognizing that we are in the final steps of a process – a process that was shown to our forefather Abraham – we must discover what action is required of us in this particular step of the process, and then we must act. Being proactive means taking control of the situation rather than allowing it to control us.

¹⁰ Isaiah 49:6.

The work of earlier generations was more internal. Spiritually they were more evolved and naturally gravitated to God. Their minds and hearts were more attuned to spiritual experience, and they served God with deeply felt emotions.

Today we don't have the same revealed sense of Godliness – our minds don't easily relate to God and our hearts don't naturally feel Godliness – and on top of it all we live in a highly evolved materialistic world. So, our work is to obstinately commit with supra-rational tenacity to fulfill our mission to refine the world.

We may be spiritual midgets compared to Abraham and the giants of history, but when we connect to their vision and climb onto their shoulders, we can see farther than they did – for a midget standing on the shoulders of a giant is higher than he.

After all the refinement accomplished by previous generations, we have the last part to do. Indeed all our ancestors wait and watch in heaven for us to put the last finishing touches to what they began.

And when we do our job, we will bring about the realization of Abraham's vision. For, out of a "deep dark dread," the spark of the Messiah will sprout, ushering in a world of unity, where all of Abraham's children serve one God and serve in the way that Abraham taught them.

May we see the fulfillment of the promise: "As in the days when you left Egypt, I will show you wonders."¹¹ [Amen.]

9. Specific Suggestions (Optional)

- Make a new commitment to a mitzvah, even if you are not in the mood for it, but you just know it's the right thing to do.
- Instead of being paralyzed, go out there and do something good. Initiate something – like a gathering in your home. Invite friends and do some reading and praying together.

¹¹ Michah 7:15.

- Find a cause and dedicate yourself to it with absolute passion and commitment.
- Take time each day to shut out all the outside static, and focus on God and the blessings in your life.
- Train your children to do all of the above, for the best way to teach your children is by example.
- And last, but not least, be sure to always light Shabbat and holiday candles. For the Midrash¹² promises that, in the merit of these flames, we will be blessed to kindle the lights of Zion. May it happen speedily in our days, Amen.

¹² Yalkut Shemoni *Parshat Beha'alotecha*.