



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vayakhel

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 22, 2014

Vayakhel

Can You Be Too Jewish?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vayakhel > Can You Be *Too* Jewish?

February 22, 2014

ABSTRACT

Can you be too Jewish?

Can you have *too* much of a good thing? Can you be *too* holy, or *too* religious, or *too* good?

Can an institution – say a synagogue, or a school, or a hospital, or a community center – ever have too much money? Harvard, Yale, Stamford have billion-dollar endowment funds, but does that stop them from more fundraising?

A rudimentary reading of our Torah portion seems to imply that there comes a point when enough is just enough. Which seems odd – shouldn't the Torah teach us to always strive for more and reach beyond the horizons?

A beautiful teaching from the Ohr HaChaim about the sufficient excess of the Sanctuary in the desert, teaches us the miracle of having an abundance of energy, yet making that abundance exactly enough to empower our lives.

Contrast that with the excess at the Sochi Olympics.

It also guides us in how to educate our children. Do you want your children to have excess or exactly enough? The Torah says both! Your children should have an abundance, and they should focus it into exactly enough.

Isn't this way *too* Jewish of an answer?

CAN YOU BE TOO JEWISH?

1. Bar Mitzvah Studies (Joke)

Bar or Bat Mitzvah, as we all know, is a highly stressful process. A child is bombarded with learning this and learning that, compounded by parental interference. As it happens, most parents have very specific ideas of what their child should and should not be studying about Judaism.

One such case came to my attention a while ago. Sammy came home from his first Bar Mitzvah lesson all excited, and he shared with his parents what he learned about Shabbat. The parents were very distraught. They came running to the rabbi.

“Rabbi, how can you teach our Sammy about Shabbat? You know we don’t observe the Shabbat. It’s too Jewish. Teach him something else.”

Okay. The next week the rabbi taught Sammy about God. Again the parents come running. “Rabbi, you know we are atheists and don’t believe in God. Please, please teach Sammy something else in preparing him for his Bar Mitzvah.”

This continued week after week. When the rabbi taught about keeping kosher, the parents didn’t want their child learning about these ancient dietary procedures. When the rabbi taught about Torah, the parents objected that a book that claims God created the world in six days should not be taught to their progressive child.

Finally, after weeks of this back-and-forth, the rabbi met with the parents: “You don’t want me to teach Sammy about Shabbat, or God, or Kosher, or Torah, or Tefillin – please, tell me, what exactly do you want me to teach your child?”

The parents looked at each other and, in harmony, replied: “Rabbi, all we ask is that you teach Sammy about Judaism.”

Another:

A distraught father brings his son to a rabbi: “Rabbi, you must do something. My son has begun studying and praying each day for hours on end. He is doing mitzvahs beyond the letter of the law. He has become so devout that I am afraid he is going off his mind.”

“But isn’t that what we all are trying to be – more pious Jews? Isn’t that what you expect from me as a rabbi and from yourself and from all our teachers – to be as devout as possible and to teach our children to be the same?”

“Of course, Rabbi. The problem here is that my son, *nebach*, actually believes it.”

2. JDate Advertises

Last week, *The New York Times*¹ ran a story about a new advertisement campaign created for JDate, an online dating website targeting Jewish singles. In the words of Greg Liberman, the chief executive of Spark Networks, which owns JDate, the new campaign “is more about emphasizing the ‘J’ in JDate and about reinforcing what we’re here for – we’re here to build the Jewish community.”

To do so, they came up with some very Jewish lines of copy. Like for example: “6,000 years of persecution just so you can go on match.com?”

The new, cheeky tagline attached to this campaign is: “Get Chosen.”

Some pundits are quoted in the *Times* article as saying that this campaign is too obvious, hackneyed and cliché. In other words, they are saying that the campaign is too Jewish, almost obnoxiously so. Those in favor of the campaign, say that “too Jewish” is exactly the point of the ads – to attract Jews to Jews.

This all got me thinking: Can something be *too* Jewish? Or can a person be *too* Jewish, or *too* religious, or *too* holy, or *too* spiritual?

¹ Laying the Lox on Thick, a Dating Site Focuses on Jewish Humor. *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2014.

Assuming that being Jewish is a good thing, can one have too much of a good thing? Or does there ever come a point when one has to draw a line – when enough is just enough?

This question may also be applied to building something positive, like a communal institution. Can an institution – say this synagogue, or a school, or a hospital, or a community center – ever have too much money? Harvard, Yale, Stamford have billion-dollar endowment funds, but does that keep them from continuous fundraising? If they have enough money, why do they continue to ask for more?

3. Stop Sign

Much can be said on this point. And I am certain all of you here right now are thinking of a “too Jewish” moment, perhaps the first time you smeared a bagel with cream cheese or were yelled at by an Israeli cab driver.

Jackie Mason is famous for saying that, after his shows, the gentiles say “that was great,” and the Jews say, “that was too Jewish...”

As a rabbi, allow me to please share the Torah’s perspective on this question. After all, the Torah is perhaps the most “*too Jewish*” thing in existence, so what does it have to say about this topic?

Lest you be concerned, this discussion is not entirely an intellectual exercise – answering this question will also teach us a very important lesson for our lives today.

This week’s Torah reading, *Vayakhel*, addresses the idea of having too much of something. A rudimentary reading of these verses seems to imply that there comes a point when too much is just too much.

And they spoke to Moses, saying: “The people are bringing an abundance, more than is sufficient for the making of the articles which the Lord had commanded to do.” So Moses commanded, and his voice resonated

throughout the camp, saying: "Let no man or woman bring any more material for the offering for the Holy." So the people stopped bringing. And the material was sufficient for them for all the work, to do it and to have excess.²

When the contractors and artisans and carpenters and sculptors began building the Sanctuary in the desert, all the people of Israel came and brought whatever they could to help facilitate the construction. At a certain point, the peoples' donations were more than sufficient and became abundant. So Moses instructed the people to stop bringing more. The people listened and stopped.

At first flush, this doesn't seem like the Torah at all. The Torah is always pushing the envelope ... the Torah never thinks it's enough ... we always must do more and give more. And when it comes to something spiritual, such as building a Sanctuary for God, it would stand to reason that we would want to build the most luxurious structure that we could devise. So what gives here? What is this passage trying to teach us? Why would Moses instruct the people to stop bringing donations?

Imagine today, a rabbi who is fundraising for any building project. His community is so generous that there comes a point when there is an actual abundance (I know, I'm dreaming), and the rabbi has to yell for the people to stop. Every rabbi should have such a problem!

But, today, no rabbi or leader or fundraiser anywhere would tell people to stop bringing. Instead they would either create an endowment fund of sorts, put the money away for a rainy day, or increase the size and scope of the project, improve on the quantity and the quality (in other words, spend the money one way or another).

So why, at the building of the first House of God, the *Mishkan* in the desert, did Moses instruct the people to stop donating? Could Moses not have found some use for the money, or create a fund for future maintenance? Why did Moses tell the people that we have *too* much of a good thing?

²Exodus 36:5-7. Literally, this verse reads, "Let no man or woman do any more work."

4. Sufficient Or Excessive?

The Ohr HaChaim³ highlights the final verse in the Torah's description of "enough is enough," and points out that this verse also presents an apparent contradiction: *And the material was sufficient for them for all the work, to do it and to have excess.*

In the famed Talmudic prelude to a question – *m'ma nafshach*, either/or – if the material was *sufficient* for all their work, then there wasn't excess? And if there was *excess* and *surplus*, then it wasn't *sufficient* and *enough* – it was more than sufficient and *more* than enough?

If there was surplus then the verse should have simply read, *And there was surplus material for all the work*, and if there was just enough then it should have read *And the material was sufficient for them for all the work*.

Why did the verse present an apparent contradiction?

5. A Sufficiently Excessive Answer

The Ohr HaChaim answers as follows:

The Torah is teaching us an invaluable lesson: The donations that the people brought were both sufficient and excessive.

How is this possible?

The Jewish people gave with all of their hearts. They brought so much gold, silver, and other materials that there was excess – much more than was needed. But, miraculously, God channeled all of the excessive donations in such an efficient and structured manner that all of the excess became exactly enough!

Still, why the need for such a miracle? And why did Moses stop them – if God would make it all work out miraculously? Why not let the people keep bringing?

³R' Chaim ben R' Moshe ibn Attar (1696-1743)."

The Apter Rav⁴ elaborates on the Ohr Hachaim's commentary and explains: Everything in existence is comprised of these two opposite forces, "enough" (*dai*) and "excess" (*hoter*). This stems from the way God created the world. In the beginning, when God wished to create the world, there was a surplus (*hoter*) of energy. An excess of energy is the natural result of God creating. It is infinite energy that is all-powerful. This may be compared to the Jews bringing excess material to build the sanctuary.

However, in order for that energy to manifest in a tangible and definitive way, in such a way that would create a real material world with exact specification and exacting rules of physics, God had to say to that excess energy, "*Dai*" "enough, it is sufficient." God had to focus and channel that excess energy into very specific definitions, lest there be no detail at all – just an amorphous mass.⁵

This further explains the two seemingly opposing terms in the verse, "excess" and "sufficient." When building a sanctuary, like when building a universe, one must have an excess amount of energy, but one must also know how to channel that excess. Otherwise, there is an over-flow, a flood, an overwhelming situation.

Everything in this world is a relationship between *dai*, enough, and *hoter*, surplus. Energy is "surplus" – it is abundant; it is infinite. How we apply that energy is the "enough," the focused channeling that allows something to be.

There was more than enough, there was a surplus of energy and funding and material in the sanctuary, but that surplus became exactly enough, once it was applied in the correct and efficient manner. Nothing became overloaded or over-saturated with abundance. Efficiency equaled sufficiency.

⁴ R' Avraham Yehoshua Heschel b. Shmuel of Apt (1748-1825) in *Oihev Yisrael*, Vayakhel (pp. 57b-58a).

⁵This, writes the Apter Rav, is hinted in two of God's Names. *E-l Sha-dai*, *E-l* implies energy and *Sha-dai* mean, 'that's enough.'

6. An Electrifying Analogy

To bring this closer to our modern world, let us use electricity as an example:

Say there was an awesome energy source, a power plant pouring out copious amounts of electricity, and someone were to plug in a toaster oven into that power plant. What would happen? The toaster oven would literally turn to toast; it would become electrocuted! Why? Because there would be too much electrical input for such a low-wattage appliance to handle.

So how to solve such an issue, when the power source is much too excessive for an appliance? There are two ways:

One approach to dealing with this problem would be to turn down the voltage on the power plant to a level that is sufficient for a toaster. This works but, in the process, one loses the vast energies of the power plant.

Another approach would be to plug in an *entire city* into the power plant, via power lines and power stations, and then plug the toaster into an outlet in a wall of a kitchen in one of the houses of that city. This way the toaster gets its power, and the power plant's full ability is utilized at its full capacity. For a city, the surplus energy of a power plant suffices perfectly. For a toaster it is too much. This is called matching up energy and application.

This is exactly what happened at the Sanctuary. The people brought more funding, more energy, and more electricity (so to speak) than was minimally required to power it! But, because this was a spiritual project, a miracle happened: the surplus that the people brought was transformed into exactly enough. By formatting and channeling the surplus energy into feeding the exact needs of the Sanctuary, the surplus become sufficient.

7. *Too* Much Of A Good Thing? Maybe Not A Good Thing

Thus, one can never have too much holiness or goodness IF – and a BIG IF – that excess is utilized in the most efficient and optimal manner.

One is only *too* holy or *too* nice or *too* religious if that holiness, niceness, or religiousness is applied in the WRONG way or not applied at all.

But there is no such thing as too much of a good thing, if it is streamlined correctly.⁶

A good litmus test: If you have too much “energy,” and some of it is just sitting there as surplus, then maybe the thing you are building is not an appropriate thing for that vast energy, because appropriate things use everything that has been given and turns it all into holiness. Nothing is wasted.

8. An Olympic Example

The Winter Olympic Games are underway in Sochi, Russia. As is the case with most Olympics, for years before, the host county makes a budget and then builds the Olympic village, buildings, stadiums, arenas, hotels, by that specific budget. An Olympic tradition is to go over budget, *waaaay* over budget.

Russia’s budget for this year’s Winter Olympics was 8 billion dollars. But, by some estimates, Russia has actually spent closer to 50 billion dollars on these games. That’s 42 billion dollars more than they projected it would cost. That’s called excessive, not sufficient. In fact, it’s been called “a bacchanalia of waste and corruption.”⁷

⁶ We are specifically commanded in the Torah: “Do not add and do not subtract from the mitzvot.” (Deuteronomy 4:2. 13:1). We can understand why not to subtract, but why not add? Because we ought not be holier than God. And if you feel you can add, then one day you may feel that you have the right to subtract. In a similar vein, abstinence vows are frowned upon in the Talmud, which states, “It’s enough what the Torah prohibited you from doing.” In other words, you don’t need to add more prohibitions than necessary. (Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarm 9:5).

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/world/europe/russians-debate-sticker-price-of-sochi-games.html>

Too much of something is a negative if it wasted or not put to good use. It is also magnified, because there is so much of it. The miracle is having abundance, and being able to channel that abundance into tangible results. The miracle is to have too much, but to make it just enough.

The message for us is clear:

We have to give as much as we can and as enthusiastically as we can, whatever it is that we give. Then the Creator will make sure that the surplus is enough, by providing us with a system (called Torah and its mitzvahs) that channel out vast potentials into tangible reality.

9. A Child-Rearing Example (Optional)

Let me try to bring this further down to earth with a child-rearing example.

What's the best way to raise your children, with *excess* or *sufficiency*?

Children are our future. Everything we have mentioned until now is a perfect lesson of how to raise children and educate them to be wholesome adults. Education and childrearing is the perfect balance between giving them everything (an excessive surplus) and making it exactly enough (sufficient).

When I was a child, whenever my parents couldn't afford something that I thought I needed, they didn't say, "We can't afford it, therefore you can't have it." Instead, they said: "Right now, you probably don't need this in your life."

Or, as the conversation used to go with my grandmother, whenever I asked for something she wasn't ready to give me:

I would say: "*Bubbe, ich vill a tzukerke* - Bubby, I want a candy!" And she would respond: "*Nu, megst vellen* - "Nu, so you're allowed to want." She didn't say, "You can't have it." She said, "You are allowed to want it, but wanting it doesn't mean you are going to get it at this present juncture in time."

As a child, the words “*megst vellen*” made me cringe. Now I see the wisdom in these words and say the same thing to my children. It is the healthy nature of children to want and want some more. But a healthy child also knows when they have enough.

You want to give your children everything, and you should want to give your children everything. But everything we give them should be exactly enough of what they need.

As Warren Buffet put it: “I want to leave my children enough money so that they would feel they could do anything, but not so much that they could do nothing.”

Education is not teaching your children that they can *only* have this or *only* have that, that they should only want what is sufficient. No, as the Torah teaches it, education is showing your children that they have *excess*, the gifts they have are abundant, more than enough, infinite – and education is showing them how to channel and focus that blessing in such a way that this excess, this abundance is transformed into *exactly enough*, and is *exactly sufficient* for transforming their lives into sanctuaries for the Divine.

Thus, education is not teaching your children not to want the world and to be satisfied with what they have. Education is teaching your children the world is yours – *b’shvili nivra haolam* – and education is teaching your children how to channel the infinite blessings they have into holy and miraculous things.

10. Laser Beam (Story)

And now let me tell you a story:

A very bright young man was constantly falling behind in school, and no one understood why. Finally, his parents took him to see a rabbi. “I hear you are very gifted at science,” the rabbi said, “so tell me, what is the difference between a very bright electric light and a laser beam?”

“That’s simple,” the teenager said. “The laser amplifies and focuses light rays to make the beam more intense; the other light just disperses its rays every which way.”

“But doesn’t it take more energy to produce the laser beam?” the rabbi asked.

“Not really,” the teenager said, smiling as he realized where the rabbi was leading him. “It is just a matter of concentration and focus.”⁸

This is what Moses was trying to teach the people by commanding them to stop bringing excess. Sometimes, in order to realize the infinite gifts we have and to learn how to channel them in a healthy and productive manner, we have to stop, reflect, and cease bringing in order to start building.

11. In Conclusion: Enough Is Enough

A rabbi, priest, and minister were once discussing what they do with the donations to their respective religious organizations. The minister said that he draws a circle on the floor, throws all of the donation money in the air and, whatever lands in the circle, he gives to God, and whatever lands outside of the circle, he keeps.

The priest said he uses a similar method. He too draws a circle on the floor, but whatever lands outside of the circle, he gives to God, and whatever lands in the circle, he keeps.

The rabbi had a slightly different method of dividing the money. He said he throws all the money in the air. Whatever God wants, He keeps.

⁸Related in *Toward A Meaningful Life* by Rabbi Simon Jacobson.

We have been gifted with infinite abundance in our lives. We have life, we have families, we have health, we have homes, we have friends – we have excess and may we have even more excess. Whatever God does not want us to have, He keeps; whatever God wants us to have, He gives. And how He gives.

But we are never satisfied. If we would be satisfied, I believe God would not be satisfied. God wants us to want more, to want excessively, to desire abundantly.

And there is one thing, one thing only that inspires God to give excessively and abundantly. That is when we utilize the abundance, channel the excess, and optimize the deluge that God gives us in such a way that nothing goes to waste and it becomes exactly sufficient. Exactly enough! Enough to build our lives, enough to build our families, enough to build our communities, and enough to build our sanctuaries.

Using our excess and abundance to build a sanctuary in a sufficient manner, ensures that God will continue to rain the blessings down upon us, His children.

At the end of the day, a material thing like a Jewish dating website, or its ad campaign, might certainly be perceived as “*too* Jewish.”

But one thing can never, ever be perceived as “*too* Jewish,” and that is a Jew. A Jew can never be “*too* Jewish.” A Jew thinking he or she is “*too* Jewish” is like a bank thinking it has “*too* much money.”

Believe me, the bank will find somewhere wise to invest that excess.

And so will the Jew!

Shabbat Shalom!

© Copyright 2014 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.