



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Vayakhel

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 25, 2011

Vayakhel

Two Sermons

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Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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Enter the Heart”

Shemot > Vayakhel > Sinai Revolution

February 25, 2011

[Note: This sermon examines a generic Torah issue and can be used at any time, though it is especially fitting for those parshiot which discuss the revelation at Sinai and the building of the Sanctuary, as well as for Shavuot and Simchat Torah.]

ABSTRACT

As we watch the events unfold in the Middle East with bated breath, we wonder if the end result will be a freer Middle East or a more radical one. For, as we well know from history, just as revolutions don't guarantee freedom, neither do democracies.

The French Revolution led to a Reign of Terror by the mob and was followed by neither democracy nor freedom for many decades. The Russian Revolution led to the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union. The Iranian Revolution led to theocratic rule of the Ayatollahs, and as we watch the repression of protests in Teheran, we see that “let freedom ring” is hardly the motto of the Iranian republic.

So much for revolutions. As for democratically elected leadership, let's not forget that the Nazis were democratically elected to office in Germany, and so were the terrorists groups Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Democracy is simply the rule by majority vote. And majorities can vote to repress minorities and deny them the most basic of freedoms. So democracy does not equal freedom *per se*.

What then makes the United States different? Why did the American Revolution bring with it a lasting and stable democracy with real freedoms and rights to all its citizens (even if

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those rights required some tweaking over the years via amendments to the Constitution)?

Because the Founding Fathers built the new democracy on Torah values given at Sinai. That is the truth, plain and simple. If we examine the entire history of civilization, we see that the earliest roots of true freedom for all men originated at Sinai some 3,300 years ago. True freedom was the best known result of the Sinai Revolution. But there was another even more important result. This sermon examines both.

THE SINAI REVOLUTION: WHY DEMOCRACY DOES NOT GUARANTEE FREEDOM

1. Riddles (Humor)

- What two keys can't open any doors?
A don-key, and a mon-key.
- What always sleeps with its shoes on?
A horse.
- What is as big as an elephant, but weighs nothing at all?
The shadow of an elephant.
- A man is incomplete until he is married. After that, he is finished.

Okay, that was too easy. Now here is the riddle that the Queen of Sheba posed to King Solomon:

“A woman said to her son: ‘Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son, and I am your sister, who am I?’”

Got that? No? Well, King Solomon did. He promptly answered, “You are a daughter of Lot.”

And for the riddle of the week: What is the difference between democracy and freedom?

2. Democracy vs. Freedom

As we watch the events unfold in the Middle East with bated breath, we wonder if the end result will be a freer Middle East or a more radical one. For, as we well know from history, just as revolutions don’t guarantee freedom, neither do democracies.

The French Revolution unseated the corrupt rule of King Louis XVI but – despite its famous “Declaration of the Rights of Man” – led to a Reign of Terror by the mob and was followed by neither democracy nor freedom for many decades.

The Russian Revolution unseated the absolute rule of Czar Nicholas II but – despite its aim to give power to the workers – led to the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union.

The Iranian Revolution unseated the dictatorial rule of Shah Pahlavi only to replace it with theocratic rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, and as we watch the repression of protests in Teheran, we see that “let freedom ring” is hardly the motto of the Iranian republic.

So much for revolutions. As for democratically elected leadership, let’s not forget that the Nazis were democratically elected into office, and so were the terrorists groups Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Democracy is simply the rule by majority vote. And majorities can vote to repress minorities and deny them the most basic of freedoms. So democracy does not equal freedom *per se*.

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doms and rights to all its citizens (even if those rights required some tweaking over the years via amendments to the Constitution)?

Because the Founding Fathers built the new democracy on Torah values given at Sinai. That is the truth, plain and simple.¹ The American Founding Fathers did not just speak of rights of citizens (like the Enlightened French) or rights of workers (like the Communist Russians) – they spoke of inalienable rights granted equally to all men *by their Creator!*

3. The Earliest Roots

If we examine the entire history of civilization, we see that the earliest roots of true freedom for all men originated at Sinai some 3,300 years ago. It is there that the human race received its mandate to build a new kind of civilized world. This civilized world would be truly free because it would rest on a foundation of such *core values* as peace, justice, equality and social responsibility – values which were not part of *any* civilization until then.

That was the Sinai Revolution. But, in fact, *two* revolutions took place at Sinai.

First and foremost, at Sinai, God made it clear that freedom comes from Him. The Ten Commandments begin with the statement: “I am your God who delivered you from Egypt, from the house of bondage.”² (And the Jewish sages explain that Egypt – in Hebrew *Mitzrayim*, meaning “confinement” – refers to all forms of slavery, anything that inhibits human freedom.)

The opening of the Torah which was formalized at Sinai states that the human being was created in the Divine Image. By virtue of this fact, each of us has unalienable rights, as the American Founding Fathers

¹ Documented in *On Two Wings* by Michael Novak, and *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* by Abraham I. Katsh.

² Exodus 20:2.

made clear and as Presidents of the United States have reminded us at regular intervals:

“From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity and matchless value because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and Earth.”³

Once that axiom is in place, we have the solid foundation upon which all law and order stands – the Divine Authority that has endowed *us all* with fundamental freedoms and with a moral system by which to live.

4. The Bedrock

Take away the bedrock of the First Commandment – that God is the source of freedom – and all else inevitably falls. With no Creator imbuing us with absolute freedom and defining for us a blueprint for life, all morality becomes arbitrary and relative.

A colleague tells of his Uncle Irving arriving in Berlin in 1921 and being astonished at the warmth and politeness of the German people. When he was lost, a mere passerby (who could not have missed his Jewish garb) personally escorted him to his destination. Ten years later, these same polite Germans declared Jews sub-human, and a mere twenty years later they escorted them to the gas chambers. That is what arbitrary and relative morality looks like in practice.

The Nazis defied basic morality – including the Sixth Commandment “thou shalt not murder” – because they defied the First Commandment, refusing to accept God as the source of life and freedom.

³ President George W. Bush in his inaugural address Jan. 2005.

5. The Second Revolution

So that was the first great revolution at Sinai – the bestowal of freedom by God on all human beings.

But the second revolution that took place at Sinai was even greater than the first.

Before Sinai there was an impenetrable rift between heaven and earth, between matter and spirit. An invisible wall separated between the transcendental and the material. A schism separated between above and below. “That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above.”⁴

But at Sinai all that changed. Heaven was unplugged. For the first time the human race was given the opportunity to bridge heaven and earth – to fuse spirit and matter. It gave us the power to spiritualize the material, and to make our lives sacred, not just ethical.

This was no small event.

6. How High Can We Reach?

Philosophers, thinkers, theologians and lay people have all always asked the eternal question: How high can a human being reach? Are we humans just sophisticated beasts, with limited potential? Can we ever reach heaven or bring heaven down to earth? Can we integrate spirituality into our material lives? Can we fuse the finite and the infinite?

The fact is that matter and spirit are in a perpetual struggle. Narcissism, greed, corruption are staples of life. When we look at ourselves, each of us knows that we are often selfish, and sometimes even to the detriment of others. When selfishness becomes extreme, it can destroy lives of those around us. On the other hand, we also have a divine spirit inside of us. We have the power to live noble lives, filled with dignity and selflessness.

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4.

So we have an inevitable clash. Matter by its very nature is selfish. Spirit is selfless. No wonder that people have always speculated whether these two worlds can meet, let alone merge.

In general, we find two approaches evolving in history: self-denial and self-immersion. The former holds that, in order to experience the spirit, we must separate ourselves from the physical tentacles of life by meditating and becoming absorbed in a higher reality. In other words, we must deny the material life – to reach the infinite, we must deny the finite.

The other extreme is self-immersion. This approach assumes that we cannot really reach heaven. We must live ethically, build healthy homes and workplaces, and find spirit in limited ways within our limited lives. Because we are essentially mortal creatures, with inherent selfishness or even evil tendencies, we cannot expect anything more than the best an earthy creature can achieve. The infinite can never be integrated into our own finite lives.

7. The Third Option

Sinai opened the door of a third option. Sinai created an interface that bridged heaven and earth, giving us the power to integrate matter and spirit, utterly and completely, without compromising one or the other. The finite can become one with the infinite; matter can become one with spirit; the sacred can become one with the secular. Because God is neither spirit nor matter, He gave us the power to completely integrate the two – the power to build a Sanctuary, a home of Him, where He could dwell among us. [Indeed, this is the focus of this week's Torah reading.]

This third option, however, does not come easily. As limiting as the first two options may be, they seem simpler, while the Sinai option requires a continual straddling of the thin line between matter and spirit.

That is why Sinai came after much hard work, and why it has taken thousands of years to begin integrating Sinai's power into global affairs.

8. Where Do We Stand Today?

So where do we stand today?

The first revolution of Sinai, the message of freedom, has finally infiltrated most of the nations of the world. Today, Freedom House ranks only 25 of the world's 192 countries as "unfree."⁵ Unfortunately, quite a few of these are in the Middle East, which is why we are rooting for Egypt and Iran – as well as Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, and all the rest – to get it right.

But the second revolution, integration of spirit and matter, has yet to take hold – that is on a personal level. In technology, science, medicine and many other fields, the last century has witnessed to unprecedented breakthroughs in the bridge between matter and energy, form and function – between the invisible and the tangible, the micro forces of quantum particles and the macro forces of the universe, between DNA and the body. However, on the personal front – in our psychological lives, our relationships, business and human interactions – we have yet to find peace between our souls and our bodies, between our spiritual/transcendental needs and our physical need to survive.

9. The Ultimate Struggle

This struggle between heaven and earth has many manifestations, including the battle that we so often have witnessed between religion and secularism. If you are a firm believer, how do you deal with the secular world?

According to the two-abovementioned options you either have to wage a holy war against the secular, or you embrace it. Therein lies the essential root of the religious wars waged throughout history. Recognizing secular heresy as an enemy, first the Christians and now the Muslims, have waged aggressive battles with the forces they have perceived as threatening.

⁵ "High Hopes, Hard Facts" by Fareed Zakaria, *Newsweek*, Jan. 31, 2005.

Peace will not come until we embrace the Sinai mandate in its entirety. In addition to Sinai's message of freedom, we are called on today to integrate into our lives the Sinai system and blueprint for life, namely the universal laws of civilization as they rang out from Sinai.

It's one thing to be free. It's quite another to use the gift of freedom to live by the Divine standards expected of us. Only then are we truly free – and only then does our freedom realize its potential.

Yes, freedom is the bedrock of our lives, but freedom must be coupled with a practical system of law and order that can be implemented to build the institutions of a democratic state. This system begins with education – educating people not only that they are free and have rights, dignity and indispensable value because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and Earth, but that they also have responsibilities to live up to their calling.

Freedom is thus the foundation upon which must be built a structure that includes personal responsibility, ethical behavior and virtuous living. One without the other cannot survive.

The first of the Ten Commandments dictates the foundation; the other nine define the structure.

Our challenge is to translate the Sinai principles into a practical plan that tackles chaos, plague and poverty, and allows for each nation to define the universal laws according to their own traditions and cultures.

The stage is set. The next move is ours. All that is needed is an unwavering commitment to the Sinai laws of civilization and a demand – of ourselves and of the entire world – to live up to its calling.

It took three thousand years for Sinai's clarion of freedom to penetrate the world's nations. Let's make sure that we embrace Sinai's blueprint for life in far lesser time. Amen.

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ABSTRACT

As we think of the impressive tens of thousands that gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo (a quarter of a million by highest count), we realize the sheer power of numbers. Consider then, the text of this week’s Torah reading:

Moses assembled the entire community of the children of Israel and said to them: “These are the words that God as commanded for you to do.”

Moses succeeded in gathering together, in one place, the entire Nation of Israel – 600,000 men and their families so at least 3 million people – people of different backgrounds, diverse and distinct, yet all together ... assembled as one community.

The Talmud tells us that anyone who sees an assembly of 600,000 Jews must make the blessing: “Blessed is the Master of Secrets.” Why? Because it takes a Master of Secrets to know what is in each heart of so many people and to bring them together.

Diversity is a most powerful aspect of life. It is driving engine that provides a constant source of fresh energy. But, unfortunately diversity breeds divisiveness, and divisiveness is a plague. And Jewish divisiveness is, without a doubt, our greatest challenge today.

This sermon examines what we can do about it and how we can change the world as a result – a world that needs us to serve as a model, especially with the current upheaval in the Middle East.

1. The Great Assembly

As we think of the impressive tens of thousands that gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo (a quarter of a million by highest count), we realize the sheer power of numbers. Consider then, the text of this week's Torah reading:

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2. Diversity vs. Divisiveness

Diversity is a most powerful aspect of life. It is driving engine that provides a constant source of fresh energy. Every distinct personality makes its unique contribution to the big picture, and we are all enriched in the process. Most of us can barely appreciate the uniqueness of several individuals. It takes a Master of Secrets to appreciate the all-encompassing beauty of 600,000 individuals.

Unfortunately diversity breeds divisiveness, and divisiveness is a plague. And Jewish divisiveness is, without a doubt, our greatest challenge today.

¹ Exodus 35:1.

² Talmud, Berachot 58a.

Who hasn't heard the joke: "Two Jews three opinions." Or Gold Meir's response to Harry Truman when he complained that it was hard to be president of 180 million people. She retorted, "You should try being president of 1.8 million presidents."

Jews are opinionated and Jews are divisive. But just 60 years ago the Nazis were able to unite all Jews by their rabid hate. To them, it made no difference what type of Jew you were. Sephardi or Ashkenazi, Chasid or Misnagid, affiliated or unaffiliated, observant or non-observant – all were just Jews.

3. Where Do We Stand Today?

Where do we stand today? Who has it right?

I cannot state, even as a proud Jew, that the Jewish people are all living up to the legacy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We have too many wars going on between us, between one community and the next.

Thank God, Jewish divisiveness rarely takes the shape of violence. Unfortunately, sometimes it does, but it's not that common. Still, it's nothing to be proud of and we pray: *Barcheinu Avinu kulanu k'echad* ("Bless us our Father, together as one").

What is the explanation for this? Psychologists would say that insecure people don't know how to get along with each other. When you're insecure, you definitely cannot tolerate others. Why can't you be right without me being wrong? Why do you have to change my mind? Why can't we both just see things from different angles?

If you cannot let the other fellow have his say, then it means you are not so secure in your position. So, therefore, as long as there's someone that's going to remind you that there could be another position, you don't feel confident and you resent that fact.

Why does it have to be about winning? This isn't a corporate competition, like MacDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's, or Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, fighting to see who's going to dominate.

If you are truly a Godly person, then what you care about is not yourself – you care about what the cause demands. It's not about who wins; it's about what's God's will in the matter.

4. King Solomon Story

The classic story tells of two women who came to King Solomon with a baby, each one claiming it to be hers. So King Solomon, in his wisdom, proclaimed, "Cut the baby in half." One woman agreed. But the second woman immediately said, "Don't hurt him. Better that she should have him."

So, of course, King Solomon gave the child to the second woman, because the real mother would never let her child be killed. She would rather give him to her enemy. To the real mother survival of her child is more important than winning the argument. That's dedication. That's selflessness.

By-the-way, there is a newer version of this story...

A *shtetl* in Eastern Europe was short on guys. Mothers with marriageable daughters were despairing. Two of the more aggressive ones sent a letter to a matchmaker in the big city who responded that two eligible young men would be on the next train. But when the train pulled into the station, only one young man got off. Each of the two mothers sought to take possession of him. After a tug of war, they went to the *shtetl rebbe* to resolve the issue. In true Solomon fashion, he said, "I will cut him in half. That way each one of you can have a piece." The two mothers had the two predictable reactions. One said, "Oh no, don't do it. Give him to her." The other said, "Cut him in two." The rabbi said of the latter, "She is the true mother-in-law."

5. Selflessness

You see the selflessness of great people like Moses, for example, who was ready to sacrifice his own life for his people. When he thought God would not forgive them for the sin of the Golden Calf, he said, “Erase my name from this book,” meaning the Book of Life, the Torah.

His sacrifice meant he understood it was not about him. It’s not about who wins. It’s about what is right. That’s a very rare reaction, but it is a hallmark of a true leader ... too bad we have none like him today.

What we have is many disparate groups, each with its own leader, and every group thinks it’s superior. Very few seem to understand that God intentionally created people with diverse opinions. But whenever I say that to my zealous friends, they say to me, “Yeah, but what happens if they’re wrong?”

I answer, “Let’s say they are absolutely wrong, and you are absolutely right. How do you teach your point of view to other people? By ignoring them? By disparaging them? Or by inspiring them with your example?”

6. It’s Your Family

Imagine that you are a loving parent, and your children have a little disagreement between them. Do you take a side or do you teach your children to figure out how to work it out between them?

Of course, you take the second option. You see, when there’s real love and you truly care because it’s your child and your family, you act differently in the cause of love and family unity.

So our challenge is to see all other Jews as part of our family.

If every Jew in this world would think like that, divisiveness would disappear. Because no one would disown his own brother for having a different opinion. No one would say, “I’m right, he’s wrong, and I won’t speak to him for the rest of my life until he agrees to do things my way.”

So why do we do this to other Jews?

Simply because we don't think of them as our brothers until the Nazis come and lump us all together. Today, in prosperity and freedom, we stand divided. What is our message to our children, to ourselves, to the rest of the world, to God? Is persecution the only way to unite us all?

Can we unite with the same intensity in peace as in war?

7. Changing the World

Well, *we must* and for a variety of reasons:

- 1) First, because we are all one family, we are all the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - it's time we started acting like it.
- 2) Second, because if we don't unite something bad is likely to happen that will do it for us.
- 3) And third, because we have a responsibility to do so for the sake of the whole world.

Surely, you jest rabbi!

No. What we do affects the whole world. We Jews have always believed that. And it's a fact that what any one person (Jewish or not) does has a ripple effect. (Witness Tunisia.) And so certainly what we Jews do collectively has major impact.

We Jews are supposed to be a "light unto nations," but would anyone say we are that today?

8. Jews vs. Muslims

Until we Jews show ourselves to be leaders of morality and spirituality and Godliness, the Muslims will never respect us. Because they think that they are superior to us in these areas.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that there isn't anti-Semitism, and they wouldn't find some other excuse to hate us, but I am suggesting that if we served as that "light unto nations," we'd be seeing a different landscape in the Middle East.

But we are not. We are seeing only trouble ahead.

One thing is sure: all this was foretold. The battles have been fought – the land of the Pharaohs was in turmoil before – but we're here to talk about it. So that should give us some strength. We say at the Passover Seder *Vehi she'amda lanu* – "And it stood with us" – it's a promise that we will withstand our enemies, who have tried to destroy us in every generation, starting from Egypt and through all the empires.

So we Jews are a good example, not just for Jews but also for the entire world for what it means to be at the edge of the abyss and come through, survive and thrive.

Not like that Communist leader who said, "Yesterday we stood at the edge of the abyss, and today we took a large step forward."

We're talking about jumping over the abyss and coming out stronger than ever as a result of the experience.

9. Change Yourself, Change the World

But survival cannot be our only goal. We have a big job to do.

If we all go out and buy a box of band-aids, there will not be any paradigm shifts or any true changes. We will just buy a little more time. But that won't absolve us from the responsibility to do something about the problem – not directly in a political sense, but indirectly in our own lives, in microcosm.

Based on the principle that I stated earlier, when you change a little thing in yourself, in some way it impacts the larger world. So we can do many different things.

10. Specific Suggestions

I suggest the following:

First, learn the big picture. There is a big picture here, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel. That light is not like the pessimists tell us, the light of the on-coming train. The light at the end of the tunnel is an actual light. To see the light, to know the big picture, you must learn the Torah.

Second, keep informed about what's going on, because the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. Egypt is a big country, and there will be a lot of realignment. Already the unrest has spread to a dozen Middle-Eastern countries. No doubt, there's more to come. Hopefully, God will be merciful, and it should all end peacefully and with the least bloodshed.

Third – and perhaps most important – is to do something proactive to help heal divisiveness among us Jews. How? For starters, perhaps each of us should make an effort to visit another Jewish community, unlike the one we are accustomed to. Perhaps each of us should invite to our Shabbat table new types of people, people who may be different than we are. Perhaps each of us could organize a monthly discussion group in our home or office, where new ideas are exchanged.

The time has come to create new platforms, engage in innovative dialogues, pioneer fresh interactions that bridge our diverse strengths. The time has come to try to unite as one big (perhaps not always happy) family, but a family nevertheless. A diverse family, a unique family, a family that is a model to other nations of accommodating diversity, or respecting all its members, and of bringing into this material world a spirit that is Divine. Amen.