

Parshat B'haalotecha
May 29, 2010
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Shabbat is a time to rest, to recover and renew our strength and our energy from the demanding and challenging world that occupies our energy the other six days of the week. And while Shabbat is always a welcome respite from the demands of the rabbinate – as one of my favorite cartoons captures it by showing an obviously pious Jew with beard and yarmulke remarking to another man – the caption of the cartoon states: “and you know I will be available to you 24/6!”

Yes, while Shabbat is always a welcome day of rest – this Shabbat was even more so than most as I have just returned from an exhausting week as chairman of this year’s Rabbinical Assembly Convention that was held in New York City. Rabbinical Conventions are always a whirlwind of activity – they are physically exhausting with programs from early morning to late at night and they are emotionally trying as we experience the highs and lows of all the range of issues that confront leaders of a Jewish community that is always wrestling with demanding and challenging problems. But this year, the convention was more tiring than most as I had the honor and the responsibility to serve as Convention Chair.

For about a year now, I have spent a good deal of my free time working on this convention. Fortunately I had the help of a wonderful committee of fellow colleagues and a talented professional staff that works in our Rabbinical Assembly office but still, the convention is an important event in the life of our rabbis and I wanted to do what I could to help make this one special. It had been almost 50 years since the last convention was held in NY. The reason is that NY is not an easy place to host a rabbinical convention as affordability is one of the key requisites and as you can imagine hotels in New York are amongst the most expensive in the world – and up until now – housing everyone in the same hotel was considered a prerequisite. But we decided to try something new – as we would try many “somethings” new at this convention – and we housed all the events of the convention at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the rabbis stayed at various hotels and with friends and colleagues and relatives in the metropolitan area.

It worked out far better than we could have ever imagined. Over 500 rabbis and another 200 spouses from all over the world, spent Sunday through Thursday studying together with some of the worlds greatest scholars, *davening* together at the Seminary, exploring the challenging issues of our day and having a good time renewing old friendships and making new ones.

Too much happened to adequately summarize in any kind of detail (I have some copies of the convention schedule of any of you want to peruse it later) –but to give you just a quick insight into the kinds of things we studied our convention opened with a fascinating discussion led by Rabbis Harold Kushner and David Wolpe on the challenges confronting Conservative Judaism. There were some 75 courses offered over the 5 day convention – from one session classes taught by Prof Neil Gillman professor of Jewish Philosophy at the Seminary on “The Bodies of God: Biblical and Post-Biblical Implications... to Muslim Anti-Semitism: New or Old taught by Rabbi Mark Cohen Professor of Jewish Civilization from Princeton. There were also multi day courses in Disaster Spiritual Care and *Rav Hamachshir* – on Kashrut Certification. The *Beit Midrash* at the Seminary was open all day and staffed with rabbis so you could always stop by at any time and study and of course conventions are a time for professional development so

their were Seminars on Basic Computer Tips – everything from how to enable Hebrew on your computer to Jewish resources on the web you can't live without and one that was titled: The Rabbi Wears Many Kippot – Executive Management and Leadership in the Non-Profit Enterprise. We held an Innovators Forum where rabbis from all over the world could share the creative and dynamic things we are doing and we could learn from each other. We were addressed by the Chancellor Arnie Eisen and the Ambassador to Israel Michael Oren – we had a wonderful session with Dan Senor author of the best selling “Start-up Nation” about the economic miracle that is modern Israel. Of course we had time for fun as we went to a Mets game and had a circle line cruise around Manhattan and a Neshama Carlebach Concert where she performed together with the Greener Pastures Baptist Choir and preceded by wine tasting – an evening that was made possible by the sponsorship of our own David Taub and Recanati wines.

The convention was a remarkable success and I stand before you exhausted by what it took to pull off but enormously fulfilled by our accomplishments. It was a convention of firsts – for the first time in 50 years we were able to take advantage of New York most notably JTS, for the first time we communicated with our colleagues in real time using email and text messaging, for the first time major sessions were streamed live on the web – so that those who couldn't attend could still participate. For the first time – we dedicated our remarkable new *Mahzor – Lev Shalem*.

But if a Rabbinical Convention is physically exhausting – it is also emotionally exhausting. Can you imagine what rabbis talk about when we get together? You.

You are not an easy people to work for. We begin so young and hopeful – filled with idealism of teaching torah and transforming – if not the world – at least our little corner of that world. And then we meet you. Not any one of you in particular – but all of you in general – Jews, the Jewish people, *amcha*. You – in case you have not noticed – are not easy – it was Moses who first called you an *am k'shei oref* – a stubborn and stiff necked people – and that was some 3200 years ago and to be honest—you haven't gotten better with age.

You want us to teach you but you don't want to take classes, you want us to create a warm and caring community and then you spend most of your time in that community criticizing and complaining and then wonder why it is not more warm and caring. You are a frustrating lot – and a good portion of convention is allowing time for rabbis to get together to vent and support each other and just share the frustration of what it means to try and be a leader in the Jewish community. What is that old joke about the waiter who comes over to your table and usually asks: “Is everything ok?” And in a Jewish restaurant he comes over and asks: “Is anything ok?”

As I said, we are not the first Jewish leaders to experience what a challenging group you are. In today's torah portion of *Behaalotecha* Moses is brought to his knees. Here was Moshe Rabeinu – he had on behalf of this people, confronted the mightiest pharaoh in the world, led them out of slavery to freedom, defended them, saved them, fed them and nurtured them – he split the sea for them and produced manna from heaven for them and what does he get for his efforts? A life contract? A dinner in his honor? Their undying gratitude? I don't think so. No – they complain. Here they were in the desert – in the wilderness – and Moses had provided them with manna – food that literally fell from heaven to sustain them and in ch 11 of today's reading it states: “the people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. And the Lord heard and was incensed.”

Now here is poor Moses – the people are angry, God is angry and he has to deal with it all. Why are the people so angry? Well – here is their complaint from ch 11, v. 4 – “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons, the leeks and the onions and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!” And God is angry over this incredible display of ingratitude. And Moses, poor Moses – well – he finally can’t take it any more either - v. 11 – And Moses said to the Lord, (and I wish I was a better actor because there is no way I am going to do justice to this torah moment but, well here goes) And Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant, and why have I not enjoyed your favor, that you have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised an oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give this entire people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat! I cannot carry this entire people by myself, for it is too much for me. If you would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

Now I am sure I have not done justice to the emotion of Moses cry. And I cannot begin to imagine the power of the silence that followed this outburst. But imagine that moment – the people were silenced and God was silenced – and Moses – poor Moses was silent - -he had nothing left to give. And then God was the first to speak: v. 16 “Gather for me seventy elder’s of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you.” And so the rabbinate was born. Notice – God does not solve the problem – he does not perform some miracle to make the people less of a burden, more appreciative, more understanding – that appears to be even beyond God’s abilities. But if he could not make you any easier to bear at least he could get Moses some help - to share the load – ease the burden, so it does not fall on the shoulders of just one man.

And here we stand – 3200 years later – and to be honest you, my dear, precious, beloved, Jewish people – you are still a burden. And many of us rabbis have our Moses meltdown moments where it becomes too much for us as well – and these conventions serve as a critical therapy – where we share and care for each other and remind ourselves that it no longer falls on the shoulder of just one man – or woman – as we also celebrated 25 years since the ordination of the first woman Conservative Rabbi.

So this is when the cynic in your midst should shout out: “So why do you do it? If we are such a burden – if we are so ungrateful and so difficult – no one is forcing you to be a rabbi.

Which is the other reason why these conventions are so important – because just when the burden seems so great that like Moses we feel that maybe we should seek another line of work – we come together and remind ourselves why we do what we do and why we need to keep doing it – even though you do not make it easy.

If the end of today’s torah reading captures the problem – the beginning reminds us of the cure – *Vayidaber Adonai el moshe laymor* – God spoke to Moses saying: Speak to Aaron and tell him – *behaalotecha et haneyrot* -- that when you light the *menora*... let the seven lamps give light at the front of the *menora*.

We have in the very opening line the simplest expression of the job of a Jewish leader anywhere ever written – to light the *menora*. Ours is a sacred job – to bring light into the world, we are challenged to be an *or lagoyim* - a light to the nations. The ancient *menora* stood in the *mishkan* – in the holy of holies. The holy of holies was one room at the very center of the tabernacle – later of the Temple itself – and only the High Priest could enter that room – and you know what was in that room? Practically nothing! An altar – upon which he could place his sacrifices and a menorah to give light. That was it. And the job of the priest was to light the *menora* and to keep the menorah lit – and that simply put has been the job of every priest and every rabbi for the past 3200 years – to light the *menora* and to keep it lit.

There is a beautiful commentary on this in our *humashim* –page 816 – after Aaron was charged with the job of lighting the *menorah* – the bible merely says: *vayaas keyn* - Aaron did so. Look at the comment by the Vilna Gaon at the bottom of the page: 3. Aaron did so – Day after day, year after year, Aaron’s attitude never changed. His work never became routine or boring. He approached each day with the same sense of reverence he brought his first day.”

We became rabbis because we sensed this beautiful and wonderful light that is torah. We saw a dark world that was in need of God’s light. We met tortured souls that we knew could be healed by God’s light. We felt the warmth of torah and we wanted to share it with our fellow Jews. So we became rabbis – because we like Aaron wanted to kindle the light and keep it burning – we wanted to spend our lives near that light, warmed by that fire – and we have our Moses meltdowns from time to time – which is why these conferences are so important – because they remind us of how important is our work - how much you need this light, how much the Jewish community needs it, how much the world needs it – and we return to our communities – whether in Roslyn or Sau Paulo, Brazil, whether in Beersheva or Boca Raton – we come back to keep the light lit and like Aaron day after day, year after year find the love and reverence that makes our job possible.