

## Drash for Shabbat Shekalim 2022 – parashah VaYakhel

55 years ago, this Shabbat, I stood at the Bimah for my Bat Mitzvah. In those days, women were not counted for a Conservative minyan, nor allowed to have an Aliyah, read Torah, or to lead services – except on Friday night. So, to mark my Bat Mitzvah, I did what all the girls in my congregation were allowed to do. I led Friday evening services, chanted a few verses of Haftorah, and read a drash which had been written by the rabbi. Today, I am proudly counted in the minyan, and I could, if I wanted, read Torah or Haftorah, or lead services, none of which am I doing. I am, however, giving this drasha, in honor of my predecessors who found ways to show that women have the right to be counted, have the right to contribute equally to our community and in our society.

Today is Shabbat Shekalim, the first of four special Shabbatot leading up to Pesach. Yes, I am here to tell you that Pesach is only 7 weeks away. The special Torah reading we did today, and the special Haftorah, are designed to remind people that their annual payment of ½ shekel to build and maintain the Mishkan, and later the Temple, was due in Nissan, and that they needed to get ready. What was this payment? It measures who is counted in the community, as a census, as well as dues or taxes to support that same community. The Torah states that all who are enrolled in the community (or at least all men aged 20 and above) shall pay ½ shekel – rich or poor the same amount and it shall be assigned to the service of the Tent of Meeting.

Today we do not have a Mishkan, or a Temple for sacrifices, but if we want to be counted in this Netivot Shalom Community, we still need to pay dues, though we do make allowances for need. We do this for the same reason the Israelites did – to support this synagogue, and its staff, which is here for us whether we come regularly for services, or whether we only come at a time of crisis or a special life cycle event. If we want our shul to be here for us, we need to make sure that the building is safe, that we pay the water and power bills, and our teachers, our rabbi, and our executive director, without whom we would not have a place to come together in community.

Similarly, if we want to have our larger community – our city, our state and our country to be able to maintain schools, roads, power, etc., we need to pay our taxes. Again, we do not have a flat tax, but we have our yearly obligation to

support our communal infrastructure – and conveniently, this year, our taxes are due on Erev Pesach.

There are different ways to be counted. We can be counted in, as with dues and taxes, and we can be counted on, as our parashah today suggests. In an echo of Parashah Terumah from three weeks ago - Everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him, brought offerings for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service, men and women. And this is not just or even mostly about monetary donations, though as a former board member, I must acknowledge that financial gifts in excess of dues are essential to support the needs of our congregation. This is about working together, putting our hearts and souls into this project. (By the way, this is one of the few places in the Torah where women were explicitly mentioned as individuals in their own right). Everyone who was skilled, and everyone whose spirit moved them – isn't that what Netivot Shalom represents? Isn't this the model of a participatory shul, a participatory community? While being acknowledged as belonging is enough for some of us, many of us also want to feel that we are needed, that we are valued. We want to contribute, to create.

We have skilled service leyners and daveners – and we have great teachers so that we each can learn these skills. We also have skilled artisans – Blair and Josh who built our beautiful Aron; Cathy who made the wonderful parochet, and all those who contributed to the architectural plans, and the furnishings. But we also have members who have given from their hearts – members of our board and our committees, and all those who are working for Climate Tzedek, and for Racial Justice; those who bring food to the sick and to new parents; those who comfort the mourners and who honor the dead.

Sometimes, we are too busy when we are asked to join in, or our spirits too tired to give time or energy. That is okay. Our community is here for you – whether you know it or not. I did not do more than attend an occasional service or take a class for many years – until my mother died. She was someone who was genuinely interested in people, and I wanted to honor her memory. So, after my year of mourning, I became a regular greeter. I was grateful for the support that I received from the Chevra Kaddisha, so I also volunteered there. In the twenty years since, I have done many different things, as the spirit moved me, and when I

was asked. Shifra started a chronic pain support group when she could no longer attend services and thought that others with chronic pain might want the same type of supportive community that she did. Caroline started Shabbat Schmooze so she could meet with other new parents, and come to shul with her baby, even if she couldn't handle a full service. Allison has started an LGBTQ affinity group because that is what she saw that we, as a community, needed – it's first meeting is tonight.

While Netivot Shalom is not a field of dreams, if you build it, there is a good chance that people will come. If all you can do is show up – you can be a greeter or help with Kiddush. If you are a carpool parent, you can make an extra stop to drop off a challah to a new member. If you are a night owl, you can take a late-night shift performing Shmira for the newly deceased.

This is community – where you are counted in and can count on others to be there, and to know that you can be someone who can be counted on, as well

So too with our greater community. It broke my heart, when, after 9/11, President Bush told us that the way to show that we Americans were undaunted, was to go out and shop. But our country is not a country of consumers. As, President Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country". We are all American dreamers, who came together to form a more perfect union – not a perfect union, but better than what came before. We are a mixed multitude of a nation, people who came by choice, or were brought here, or who were here at the beginning. We are still figuring out how we can build this country together. As with our shul, our taxes alone will not do this. We are needed - wherever we are skilled, or where the spirit moves us – volunteering at schools, or food banks, getting out the vote, serving on community boards, helping refugees – there are so many places where each of us can make a positive difference.

But we must be careful. To paraphrase the commentary in Etz Chaim, G-d spoke to the whole Israelite community in this parashah and enjoined the whole community to come together to build the Mishkan, to restore the sense of unity and shared purpose that had existed before the incident of the Golden Calf introduced divisiveness and disillusionment. But what was the sin of the Golden Calf? Members of the Israelite community panicked as their leader, Moses, their

conduit to G-d, was not reachable. They were in an unfamiliar place, asked to do new things. Their future was unknown and fraught. They wanted a way to get close to G-d again and reverted to what they had known, what had worked in the past.

And what did G-d ask to be done, to bring the community back together? To create a visible place where G-d's presence could rest on golden Cherubim, golden images with wings that stretched protectively over the Ark. The people who built the Golden Calf thought they were building Cherubim, a way, a place to connect with G-d. We ourselves must be careful that the country and communities that we are building will bring us together, and not tear us apart, that they are built around common goals and needs, and are not built on *sinnat hinnam*- senseless hatred. We need to be humble in our thoughts and actions, so that we can disagree vehemently, passionately about ideas, about how to move forward, and if we are respectful and see that we are equally valued, those disagreements will not divide us.

So, today, I pray that we are, each of us, counted – counted as equal members of our Jewish communities, and of our greater communities, that we can count on each other, and that we come together to build Cherubim, so that we can dwell together, under the wings of G-d's presence.

Joan Bradus