Rivets, Kashruth and the Jewish Future: Thoughts on Parashat Shemini, April 10, 2010

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A while ago, the New York Times ran a story about a significant theory why the Titanic sunk. That great luxury ship struck an iceberg, letting ocean water plunge in. The tragedy resulted in the loss of about 1500 lives. The prevailing theory had been that the hull of the ship had been gashed open by the iceberg. The new theory offers a different explanation.

When divers actually examined the ruined vessel on the bottom of the sea, they did not find a huge gash at the front of the ship. Rather, they found small rows of thin openings that had let the sea water into the ship. What caused these rows of openings? It seems that the rivets that were used to hold the boat together--failed. They snapped under pressure, opening seams in the ship's hull. A study of the archives of the shipbuilder found that the company used stronger steel rivets at the sides of the ship, but weaker iron rivets in the front and back sections. This compromise in standards may have been a way of saving money; or a way of saving time, since steel rivets may not have been available in large enough numbers without causing a delay in production of the ship.

This decision to use iron rivets instead of insisting on the stronger steel rivets cost 1500 lives. The decision must have seemed small when first made; but when those rivets failed and the ship sank, the error of the decision became clear in a very stark way.

The shipbuilders did not skimp on the frills and luxuries of the ship. All the amenities were built to high standards of fashion and opulence. But when it came to the strength of the foundation of the ship, the shipbuilders settled for iron instead of steel rivets.

There's a lesson in this.

We sometimes make a serious error in judgment by emphasizing the superficial frills and being careless when it comes to the essentials.

Before Passover, my wife was shopping at a large New York grocery store that sells kosher and non-kosher products. She noticed a woman loudly scolding the store manager because the store did not have any more shank bones, and she needed a shank bone for her Seder plate. My wife saw, though, that this complaining woman had a shopping cart full of non-kosher meat! This complaining customer was adamant about fulfilling the custom of having a shank bone on her Seder plate; but was not at all concerned about transgressing Torah laws relating to kashruth. Her emphasis was obviously on the symbolic form of her Seder plate, not on keeping a kosher home in line with the Torah tradition. She was satisfied with external symbols, and did not think it was necessary to bother with the real laws of the Torah tradition.

Ignoring kashruth laws is like ignoring the quality of the rivets in the Titanic's hull. Kashruth is one of those basic religious institutions that serves as the foundation of a Jewish way of life. Especially in our day, when kosher foods are so readily available, it seems strange that Jews would walk right past the kosher meat section in order to buy non-kosher meat. They don't seem to understand that a kosher home plays a vital role in the continuity of Jewish tradition; that compromising on kashruth is tantamount to using defective rivets--it endangers the structural strength of the Jewish home.

People sometimes think they can compromise on kashruth, or Shabbat, or ethical commandments, or Jewish education for their children--and somehow keep their Jewish families intact. Yet, every poor quality rivet put into the ship's hull creates a potential for disaster. It is not easy for Jews to pass on Jewish identity and teachings from generation to generation. It requires tremendous effort, and tremendous concern for quality control.

If we want to build a first-class ship, we need to use first-class materials. If we want to create first-class Jewish families, we need to maintain first-class standards of Jewish observance and Jewish commitment.

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