A Spiritual Revolution Underway: Thoughts for Shabbat Vayakhel-Pekudei, March 17, 2012

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(This week's Torah portion opens with Moshe calling together the people of Israel. A "kahal", congregation, is composed of individuals who share a common background, destiny, ideology. Often, a "kahal" is centered in a particular location. But a "kahal" can also be composed of individuals who may be in different locations, but who share ideas and ideals. This week's Angel for Shabbat column is based on an address I delivered at the annual dinner of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, held on Sunday night March 11. It relates not just to the large "kahal" that attended the dinner, but to the worldwide "kahal" of Jews who believe in an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism.)

Washington Irving, one of the leading American authors of the early 19th century, wrote a popular story "Rip Van Winkle," familiar to all of us. Rip is famous for having slept for twenty years! As he made his way to a quiet spot in the Catskill Mountains, he passed the village inn on which he saw a picture of King George III. When he returned to the village after his twenty year "nap," he passed the same inn; but now instead of seeing a picture of King George III, he saw a picture of President George Washington.

Rip Van Winkle had slept through a revolution.

How does one manage to sleep through a revolution? This might be the result of apathy, aversion to risk, fear, lack of vision. It is not easy to be alert to the challenges of a revolution. It is simpler to stand aside, or go into hiding, or fall asleep.

The Midrash teaches that only 1/5 of the Israelites actually left the servitude in Egypt during the Exodus. The vast majority were unable to grasp the significance of freedom, or were daunted by leaving familiar surroundings—however oppressive—to march into an unknown wilderness on the way to a new land. The Torah tells us that the Israelites left Egypt "ki goreshu mimitzrayim," because they were expelled from Egypt. Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, asked: why did the Israelites have to be expelled from Egypt?

Wouldn’t they naturally and eagerly wish to leave Egypt to attain their freedom? Rabbi Halevy answered: there is a strong human tendency that resists change, that prefers the status quo. The Israelites were reluctant to leave Egypt to enter an unknown dimension of freedom and responsibility—so they literally had to be expelled from their slavery. Freedom is not easy to attain and not easy to maintain.

What is the process of a revolution? How do people ultimately overcome their apathy and fear, so that they actually become ready to take risks for the sake of their higher ideals?

First, people have a feeling of malaise. They sense that something is very wrong; they feel that there is injustice that must be corrected. Then, they begin to formulate these feelings into ideas; they articulate their grievances and their dreams. Finally, they move to action. They form coalitions, build institutions, create infrastructure for change.

There is a quiet revolution going on in the Jewish world right now. We are part of it. We are not sleeping through this revolution.

There is malaise, a strong feeling that things need to be changed dramatically. Within the Orthodox world, there has been a sharp turn to the right, with a frightening and dangerous increase in authoritarianism, obscurantism, and intellectual narrowness. Within the Jewish community at large, there has been a sharp turn to the left—alienation from traditional Judaism, increased secularization.

Much of the “middle” has fallen asleep. It has allowed halakhic authority to slip almost entirely into the hands of hareidi elements. It has not done enough to offer a dynamic, creative, intellectually alive Orthodoxy that could attract many thinking Jews who have opted out of Torah and mitzvoth.

But we have a group of “revolutionaries” who work steadily to re-energize Orthodoxy, to re-generate its intellectual vibrancy, to create an Orthodoxy that is compassionate, inclusive, open, awake, engaged; that is alive with energy, spirituality, beauty; that sees Judaism as a world religion with a message for all humanity, not as a self-contained sect. There are voices articulating a grand vision of Orthodoxy, an Orthodoxy that is intellectually and spiritually attractive and meaningful.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah is at the center of this Revolution. The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals is at the center of this Revolution. Various like-minded

individuals and groups here, in Israel and around the world are at the center of this Revolution. It is a long, difficult, uphill grind. There are so many obstacles—apathy, cynicism and outright opposition. Just as the ancient Israelites needed to be prodded into choosing freedom, so our communities today need to be reminded to choose freedom and individual responsibility, to eschew authoritarianism and sectarianism, to work for a grand vision of Judaism for ourselves, our children and grandchildren—and for the generations to come.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah is blessed with an administration, faculty and student body that is committed to Torah tradition with this grand vision in mind. The students of YCT are intellectually alive, idealistic, and committed to an Orthodox Judaism that has a message for the entire Jewish community and for society at large. This is an institution that trains and encourages students to think for themselves, to study deeply—and to go out and change the world! YCT is at the center of a Revolution in Jewish life; and all of us who are awake to this Revolution, who participate in it as best we can, will ultimately be rewarded with victory.

The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino Torah commentary, draws on Midrashim relating to the giving of the Luhot on Mount Sinai. The first set were given amidst great fanfare—thunder and lightning and the blasts of the shofar. Hundreds of thousands of Israelites were gathered at the foot of the mountain to witness this amazing event. And yet, when Moses brought these Luhot to the Israelites, he found them dancing around a golden calf. He cast down the Luhot and shattered them.

Moses then ascended the mountain a second time. There was no fanfare, no great commotion. God told Moses to carve out the two stone tablets by the sweat of his own brow. This second set of Luhot—created by the quiet effort of a lone man atop a mountain—became the spiritual foundation of our people. This teaches that the valuable and permanent things in life are often attained individually, quietly, all alone atop a mountain, by the sweat of our own brow.

Each of us sometimes feels that we are alone atop a mountain, struggling without anyone noticing or caring. We worry that what we are doing will bear no fruit, that we will continue to deal with golden calves and idolatries and lapses of faith. The world is complicated, and the Jewish world even moreso.

Rabbi Nahman of Braslav taught that the whole world is a narrow bridge. There are dangers that confront us. There are risks. There are opponents who want to bring us down. But, taught Rabbi Nahman, the essential thing is not to be afraid.

Kol ha’olam kulo gesher tsar me’od; veha-ikar lo lefahed kelal.

There is a revolution underway and we are all part of it. There is so much to do and so many obstacles in the way. It is easy to lose heart, to stand aside, to go to sleep. But let us remember what is at stake and let us seize this historic moment.

The essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all.

Angel for Shabbat