Light and Peace: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tissa, February 15, 2014

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By
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On Sunday night, February 9, 2014, I had the honor and pleasure of speaking at the inaugural event of the Centennial celebration of Congregation Or V'Shalom in Atlanta, Georgia. The Congregation dates back to 1914, when two groups of Sephardim from Turkey and Rhodes merged their organizations—Or Hahayim and Ahavath Shalom—into one community. Many of the current members of Or V'Shalom are descendants of the founders' generation, and many others have joined the congregation, attracted by its warmth and vitality.

In his introductory remarks at the event on Sunday night, the Congregation's Rabbi Hayyim Kassorla cited a devar Torah which I had taught him many years ago, and which I had learned from my beloved teacher Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum. This devar Torah relates to this week's Torah portion which describes the grinding of spices for the incense offerings in the Mishkan.

The Talmud cites the opinion of Rabbi Nathan, who taught: when the priest ground the incense, the one superintending would say: "grind it very fine, very fine grind it," because the voice is good for preparing the spices. The question is: what does a voice have to do with grinding spices? The answer: when the priest is grinding the spices, he may not feel that he is making any progress. It seems like rote work that does not improve the spices. A voice of encouragement reminds the priest: you are making progress, your work is not in vain. Keep grinding, you will see positive results from your labors.

The lesson goes beyond the priest grinding spices. It relates to all of us. We work hard to advance our lives and our ideas and ideals; but it often can feel frustrating. No matter how hard we labor, it often seems that we are not making real progress. We can come to feel that our efforts are futile and unproductive. But then someone comes along and says: hazak uvarukh, you are doing something important, you have impacted positively on others. The voice is good! The word of encouragement re-energizes us; we go back to our "grinding" work with a new feeling of purpose. Our work isn't in vain after all.

Words of encouragement have a profound impact. When positive words are accompanied by supportive and loving actions, then we have ingredients for happiness and progress. Critics and fault-finders are readily available. But genuine friends and supporters are the ones who validate and enhance life.

Just as we need to hear voices of encouragement for our own strivings, we also need to be the voices of encouragement to those who are doing good and important work. Just as a nasty comment can undermine someone's feeling of self-worth, so a positive comment can provide the encouragement a person needs to move ahead in a positive and meaningful way.

On behalf of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, I express a collective "hazak uvarukh" to the rabbi, leaders and members of Congregation Or V'Shalom in Atlanta. For a congregation to have achieved its centennial anniversary is a source of great celebration. It is a tribute to the labors of the earlier generations; and it is a tribute to the current congregation who so lovingly support and maintain Or V'Shalom. May the community go from strength to strength for many years to come. May you be a source of Light and Peace to your community and to the entire Jewish people.

*** For another Angel for Shabbat on this week's Torah portion, please see http://www.jewishideas.org/angel-shabbat/standing-tall-and-strong-israel-and-jewish-peo
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