Sleeping through a Revolution?--Thoughts for Vayakhel-Pekudei

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Angel for Shabbat--Vayakhel-Pekudei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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.

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.

What is the process of a revolution? How do people ultimately overcome 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 malaise in contemporary Jewish life, 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 Judaism 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 Judaism, to re-generate its intellectual vibrancy, to foster a Judaism 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.

It sometimes feels that we are alone atop a mountain, struggling without anyone noticing or caring. But we are not alone; we are part of a much larger “kahal,” a community of idealists and activists. Our “kahal” is spread out around the world and includes revolutionaries who work for change, who contribute their time, energy and financial resources. Our “kahal” does not and will not sleep through a spiritual revolution that must be waged.

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 must be 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.