

SERMON FOR PARASHAT VAYIGASH
DECEMBER 10, 2010

Hanukkah is a different kind of holyday than many of the festivals of the Jewish year. In at least two ways.

The three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot are all biblical. Because they are found in the Torah, certain restrictions about working on the actual days of the festivals pertain. On the first and second days and on the seventh and eighth days of each of those festivals, you cannot work and, therefore, if you are Orthodox, you cannot ride in a car or travel. You can on the four intermediate days, but this short period sometimes coincides with Shabbat, which means that you are pretty much grounded for the entire festival.

Hanukkah, however, is not a biblical festival. The events it commemorates occurred after the close of the biblical period. Anything that happened after 200 BCE was considered too late to be included in the Bible, so there is no mention of Hanukkah or the Maccabees in the entire Hebrew Scripture. You find the story of Hanukkah in the books of the Maccabees which are included in a collection called the Apocrypha. What this means, however, is that there are no prohibitions of working on Hanukkah. You can go to the office on any of the days (except Shabbat), and you can certainly drive your car. If you want to go “over the meadow and through the woods to grandmother’s house,” you can’t do it on Pesach or on Shavuot or on Sukkot, but you can absolutely take the trip on any day of Hanukkah.

In 1973, I had the rare privilege of receiving a research grant that found me in Rumania during the eight days of Hanukkah. Each day, I was bundled into the back seat of a big Mercedes sedan, seated next to Rabbi Moshe David Rosen, the chief rabbi of

Rumania, and we tore off through the countryside to visit small Jewish communities in the north and east parts of the country. Someday, maybe I'll tell you the entire story, but suffice it to say for this evening that the trip had its terrifying moments. Rabbi Rosen's driver was fearless. He took some curves with such acceleration that our kippahs left our bald spots and flew off to the side of the car.

There is a second and equally important difference between Hanukkah and other Jewish holydays. Let's start with Shabbat. Where did the first Shabbat take place? In the Garden of Eden, perhaps. And where was this famous garden? There are a couple of places that lay claim to Eden, but all of them are to the north of the present land of Israel, mostly in the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. Pesach commemorates events that took place in Egypt. Shavuot tells us the story of the revelation at Sinai, and Sinai is in the Negev, not in Israel, even today. Sukkot recounts the wanderings between Sinai and the Promised Land, almost all of which took place in what today is the country of Jordan. Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, while they were eventually celebrated in the Temple in Jerusalem, lack historical roots; they are holydays that could have originated and could be celebrated anywhere in the world. And Purim? Purim happens in Shushan, in ancient Persia, far to the east of present-day Israel.

Hanukkah, however, is the one Jewish holyday where everything about it is linked to the land of Israel. The Syrians defiled the Temple in Jerusalem. They went to Modi'in to persuade Mattathias to worship the idols they had installed in the sacred precincts. Modi'in is only fifteen or twenty miles northwest of Jerusalem. When Mattathias and his sons refused, they fled into the Judean hills and from that vantage began to attack the Syrian forces until, after three years, they recaptured the Temple and purified its altar.

If you were to draw a circle with a radius of twenty miles around the city of Jerusalem, everything about Hanukkah happened right there, right in the center of Judea and the land of Israel. Hanukkah is the only Jewish holyday that celebrates something that happened exclusively in this place; every other festival had its origin somewhere else and then was moved to Jerusalem and Israel once that city became the center of Jewish life.

I think that this linkage of Hanukkah with the land of Israel makes it all the more ironic and painful that it was during this festival that the devastating forest fire broke out in the Carmel Forest, just to the south east of the city of Haifa. You and I have all seen the same news reports. At least forty-two young Israelis were killed, most of them police trainees on a bus who were rushing to the fire area to help, but whose vehicle was overwhelmed by a fire-storm. The best estimate is that five million trees, many of them planted because of donations of people like us, were destroyed, along with animals and homes and other property; the fire damage covered some 12,500 acres. You have also read or heard that many countries in the world sent aid. The Russians sent two huge tankers to drop fire-retardant chemicals and water on the blaze. The United States, Greece, Cyprus, France and Canada all pitched in with significant assistance. Despite the chilling of relations that has recently occurred between Israel and Turkey, the Turks sent help. They made it clear that this was not the end of their differences with Israel, but that they could not stand by while the northern half of Israel went up in flames. The Palestinian Authority opened the homes of Christian and Moslem Arabs to displaced Jews and offered the kind of hospitality that we always assumed would be characteristic of the Middle East. The gestures of caring and generosity do not mean that long-standing disagreements will disappear tomorrow; we shall continue to differ with other nations and

with the Palestinians over any number of issues, but, at least for a moment, human kindness prevailed and the finer dimensions of human society came to the fore. In many respects, this is the pay-back for years during which the Israelis were among the first in the world to respond to human tragedy and need. You only need to think back a year to the earthquake that devastated Haiti to remember how quickly the Israelis responded with a mobile hospital, personnel and equipment.

Thank God, the fire is out. Now, the difficult job of assessing the damage begins. There will certainly be a court of inquiry to look into the origin of the conflagration. There are rumors that someone set the fire, either intentionally or accidentally. I don't know. At least one Orthodox rabbi has opined that it was God's punishment for Israel's lack of religious observance. The obscenity and idiocy of that assertion require no response. I'll leave the placement of blame to the Israelis who, being Jewish, are really good at assigning guilt.

It will be years before the Carmel Forest area can be made whole again. Houses take a while to rebuild, and trees take an even longer time to grow to maturity. Israeli teams are already on site, beginning the difficult process of reconstruction. And some losses – especially those of human life – can never be restored.

It is in this regard that you and I have a special mitzvah to perform. When we were children, we put our pennies and nickels and dimes into little blue boxes like this one. **[HOLD UP BOX]** When they were full, we turned them in and used the cash to plant trees in Israel. Some of the trees of the Carmel Forest were, undoubtedly, planted with your money. I even remember, perhaps before blue boxes gained favor, buying little

stamps for a dime at religious school and pasting them in a booklet. When the booklet was filled, it was worth a tree on the hillsides of the land of Israel.

We can do more than nickels and dimes now that we are adults. You and I can take a significant part in the restoration of this important area of Israel. It is very rare that I will make a financial appeal on Shabbat, but this is an occasion that demands that I leave that comfort zone and ask you to help.

Hanukkah is the festival that most links us with this land six thousand miles to our east. The flames of the fire in northern Israel were destructive and devastating. But the flames of Hanukkah on the altar in Jerusalem were life-giving; they represented the antithesis of what happened in the last several weeks near Haifa; Hanukkah's flames spoke about renewal and restoration. The flames of Hanukkah kindled hope and a promise for the future. That is what I hope you will do in the next few days. I ask you to do what I have already done: make a contribution for the repair of the land of Israel.

I have made my contribution through the Jewish National Fund, since JNF has traditionally been our vehicle for reforestation, ecology and the construction of infrastructure. I have put the JNF address on our website. But other organizations of integrity and good purpose are also seeking contributions, and you may want to choose one of those as the vehicle of your help. The Association of Reform Zionists of America, ARZA, has a fund; Hadassah has one; and you can certainly send a contribution through Corpus Christi's Combined Jewish Appeal. I've put their addresses on the website too.

It really doesn't matter where you send your check, so long as you do it. The destructive flames of the forest fire are extinguished, and so are the flames of Hanukkah's

candles. Now, it is your chance and your mitzvah to kindle the flames of hope for Israel's charred and devastated landscape.

Thank you for taking this appeal seriously.

AMEN

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