



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

**DISTRIBUTION DATE:**

**TUESDAY MARCH 9, 2010 / כ"ג אדר תש"ע**

**PARSHA:**

**VAYAKEL – PEKUDEI/HACHODESH / ויקהל – פקודי/החודש**

**SERMON TITLE:**

**BEING FIRST IN LINE**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

## **VAYAKEL – PEKUDEI/HACHODESH BEING FIRST IN LINE**

One of the things that everyone who visits Israel notices is that Israelis have no concept of waiting on lines. They all push and shove to be first. Every Jewish tourist has at least one story of waiting on line at the bus stop or post office in Israel like a good American boy and some Israeli coming along and cutting him off.

But this is also true for Jews within America too. For example, Jews from Cleveland don't like visiting the same parts of Florida visited by Jews from New York—they complain that New Yorkers have no manners and don't know what it means to wait on line.

Jews seem to have this obsession to be first in everything. So it's not surprising that we find this concept in Judaism.

For example, being first-born is considered special: the firstborn is considered holy and needs to be redeemed by Kohen to avoid Temple service. The firstborn also inherits twice as much as all other siblings—simply by virtue of being first. Indeed, our Patriarch Yaakov turned the world upside down just so he could secure the firstborn's birthright from his brother Esav.

Today we read a special Torah portion known as Parshas HaChodesh. The first mitzvah given to the Jewish People as a nation was the mitzvah of marking Rosh Chodesh, the Head of the Month, and we read about Rosh Chodesh in Parshas HaChodesh.

Now, what is so important about the first day of the month? Just because it's the first day of the month, that makes it important?!

But besides reading Parshas HaChodesh this week, we also read the Torah portion of Vayakhel, which tells us about the construction of the Mishkan.

In Vayakhel, we learn about how Moshe climbed down from Mt. Sinai the day after Yom Kippur and announced that they were going to build the Mishkan—and that whoever wanted to donate to the building of the Mishkan was now invited to do so. The Torah tells us that indeed, “every man whose heart lifted him and everyone whose generous spirit inspired him” all “brought the contribution for G-d.”

As the Torah describes the scene, “the men came together with the women”—they all came pushing and shoving to donate towards the building of the Mishkan. We can only picture Moshe standing there looking at the scene of chaos—how women were coming first with the little they have, how widows were bringing their pocket mirrors, how young women were bringing their jewelry, and how even the men came. True, they came behind the women, but even they brought whatever they were able to donate.

But Moshe still stood there looking for someone. He looked side to side, straining his eyes, but he did not succeed in finding those he was looking for.

Finally, after two whole days of chaos, after mobs of Jews came forward to happily donate to the Mishkan, along came a delegation of VIPs, the most respected men in the entire Jewish nation at that time: the Leaders of the Tribes. Each Tribe had a Prince who was the head of the tribe: the most important, most respected individual in the entire tribe.

Now, the twelve Princes came forward to donate towards the construction of the Mishkan—but the Mishkan already had everything it needed. Over the past two days, the good Jews had already provided everything and now, nothing more was needed. Indeed, Moshe himself had already announced: “Let no man or woman do any more work to be donated to the Mishkan.”

So G-d helped the poor Princes. There was one thing the Mishkan needed that the Jews didn’t have: the stones for the Choshen. These were the special precious stones upon which were engraved the names of the Twelve Tribes. They were extremely valuable—and extremely rare. Fortunately for the Princes, no one had donated any of these stones yet, and so they were able to contribute them.

Now, picture for yourselves Moshe Rabbeinu’s announcement the day after Yom Kippur. It triggers a mad rush of the entire Jewish nation to donate. But the Princes, the leaders, the ones who should have been first, the role models for the entire nation—it was they of all people who “got lazy.”

Now, how could that happen? How indeed could the leaders of the community, not immediately participate in this most important mitzvah?

Some commentators explain that the Leaders were simply offended that Moshe did not consult with them first. They reasoned that Moshe should have summoned them first for a special meeting, at which he would have broken the news to them that G-d wanted to build a Mishkan—and to first ask them to donate and only then the people.

But Moshe didn't do that. He didn't "separate the men from the boys"—he included them with everyone else. Indeed, we read in our Torah portion, "Moshe assembled the entire Israelite community"— he organized a convention at which he announced that whoever wants to bring a donation to the Temple, may do so. And so, the Princes were offended.

However, Rashi says that they had pure motives. Rashi states: "This is what the Princes said: 'Let the community first give whatever they give, and we will provide whatever is missing.'

Now, logically speaking, it seems that this was really the best thing to do. Being humble and modest, the Princes gave everyone the opportunity to have the mitzvah first—and only then did they do the mitzvah themselves. They didn't want to snatch the mitzvah away from their people.

Seems to have been the right thing to do, right? Wrong.

The fact that at the dedication of the Mishkan, which occurred on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, these very same Princes came first and did not let others come before them, tell us that they later understood that being last at the donations was a very serious error in judgment.

When Moshe Rabbeinu climbed down from Mt. Sinai and declared that G-d had forgiven the Jewish People for the Sin of the Golden Calf and that now we are going to build the Mishkan, a "house" by which G-d would live among the Jewish people, every Jew's healthy natural instinct would have been to get up first thing in the morning and run to be first to donate! All the calculations of giving others a chance and so on sound good—but G-d expects Jews to be first when it comes to mitzvah matters. And the Princes lost that opportunity. That's why, at the dedication of the Mishkan, they stood first in line.

In the Beis HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, the Kohanim working each day's shift would rush in the morning to be the first ones there to work. The Rambam describes the scene at length. He writes that to prevent fights over different duties, the Kohanim would organize a Payis, a sort of lottery, each morning. The shift supervisor would pick a random number and all the shift Kohanim would stand in a circle around him

holding up one or two fingers. The supervisor would then start counting fingers, going from Kohen to Kohen until he came to the number he picked. The Kohen holding up, say, finger #36 would be the happiest man on the shift—because now he would get to be the one who started the day’s work in the Temple.

Now, lest you think that this coveted first position would entitle the Kohen to some glorious, glamorous job, think again. You know what the first job of the shift was? To clean the altar. That’s right—to shovel and sweep out all the ashes. In plain English: to take out the garbage. This was the job they all fought over. Why? Simple: because they all wanted to be first.

The Rebbe mentioned many times that the Hebrew word Nasi, “prince” or “leader,” is an acronym for Nitzutzo Shel Yaakov Avinu. Each Jew contains a spark of our Patriarch Yaakov. And that’s why every Jew can be expected to be a Nasi, a leader, the first one marching in front of the band. So every morning, when a Jew wakes up, he must remember that he are a Nasi therefore, must be first in line.

On Rosh Hashanah, we have the custom of eating from the head of a fish and wishing ourselves, “Let us be heads and not tails”—meaning, when a mitzvah comes our way in the coming year, let us be the first in line to do it and not the “tail,” the person at the end of the line.

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