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IN TOUCH WITH G-D'S WILL

Vayakhel-Pekudei

In Touch with G-d's Will

Good Shabbos!

Have you ever heard about President Lyndon B. Johnson and his relationship with Jews and Israel?

As a general rule, U.S. Presidents had either a good relationship with Israel or a very good relationship with Israel. So where did the 36th president fall? In which category did he belong?

Anyone who knows even a bit of American history will know that Johnson was sworn in as President on board Air Force One, a short time after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But they might not know that a high-ranking delegation from Israel attended Kennedy's funeral, led by Israeli President Zalman Shazar.

After the funeral, the Israeli contingent met with President Johnson. He said to them, "You've lost a friend, but you've gained an even bigger friend." And indeed, President Lyndon B. Johnson took U.S./Israel relations to the level where the U.S. was now the top supporter of Israel, both diplomatically and security-wise. Until then, it had actually been France that had been selling Israel the most weapons and combat aircraft. (As a matter of fact, during the War of Independence, Soviet Russia significantly supported Israel, too—though that changed later.)

But with the Johnson administration, the U.S. became the top military supplier to Israel. Especially during the Six-Day War, Lyndon B. Johnson's support for Israel was absolute.

The story goes that the leader of the Soviet Union asked Johnson why the United States supported Israel so much when there were 80 million Arabs and three million Jews. Johnson answered him, "Because it's the right thing to do."

But what is not known is that Johnson loved Jews well before that. Not only was he a friend of the Jewish Nation, but also saved many Jews before he became President.

During the Second World War, Lyndon Johnson, who was a Member of Congress at the time, arranged for entry visas to the U.S. for hundreds of Jews from Europe, thus saving them from the Holocaust.

Even though official U.S. foreign policy at the time was to not give entry visas to anyone from Europe, Congressman Johnson essentially went against the law, and in legally fuzzy ways he helped many Jews enter the country through the Texas port city of Galveston. If he had been caught doing what he did at the time, he would have been forced out of Congress and shortly thrown into prison.

Years later, Lady Bird Johnson related that at the time her husband attended the dedication ceremony for the Agudath Achim synagogue in Houston, Jews came up to her, one after the other, telling her, "Your husband is the only reason we are alive—if not for him, we would have perished in the Holocaust."

As a matter of fact, right after the Holocaust, Lyndon Johnson traveled to Europe and visited the Dachau concentration camp. First Lady Johnson related that he came back from there shaken to the depths of his soul, filled with pain and unable to believe what the Nazis had done there.

In 1946 and 1947, Johnson sent weapons in cartons marked "Texas grapefruits" to Jews fighting in Israel against the British and the Arabs.

Now there are historians who are trying to understand who influenced Lyndon Baines Johnson in his youth to become such a huge friend of the Jews. One story is that he had an aunt who was a member of a Zionist organization. Others say that his maternal grandmother and great-grandmothers were Jewish (which, actually, would make him Jewish).

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Pikudei, we finally read about the actual construction of the Mishkan right from the beginning. In the second verse, the Torah tells us: "And Betzalel... made all that Hashem had commanded Moshe." Rashi says: "It doesn't say, '[Betzalel] made all that Moshe had commanded him' but rather, 'All that Hashem had commanded Moshe'—even things that Moshe had not told him to make, his mind was attuned to that which was said to Moshe on Mt. Sinai."

Rashi is saying that the very fact that the Torah states that Betzalel made all that Hashem had commanded Moshe, and that he had done everything that he was told to do by Moshe, implies that he also did things that Moshe had not told him to do. In other words, there were things that Moshe had not commanded him but Betzalel discerned what G-d wanted on his own.

In Jewish history, there were always those who discerned G-d's Will on their own—beginning with Avraham Avinu himself.

Regarding Avraham, the Torah tells us, "Because Avraham listened to My Voice, and guarded My Watch, My Commandments, My Laws and My Teachings" (Bereishis 26:5).

On that verse, Rashi comments that "My Watch" refers to secondary illicit relationships and the secondary Shabbos laws. Rashi also comments that "My Commandments" refers to things that are suitable to be laws even if they weren't commanded by G-d, like stealing and murder. "My Laws," Rashi continues, means such prohibitions as not eating pork or not wearing wool and linen in the same fabric. Finally, Rashi concludes, "My Teachings" refers to the Oral Torah and the Sinaitic Law According to Moses.

So we thus have it that the Sages tell us that Avraham discerned on his own everything that G-d ultimately wants the Jew to do—before even giving the Torah. Avraham was so connected to G-d that he intuitively knew what to do.

We have a clear and explicit example of this in the Torah. When Avraham sought a match for his son Yitzchak, he called his butler Eliezer and instructed him to travel all the way to Charan to find Yitzchak a wife from his own clan. Avraham made Eliezer take an oath: "And I place an oath upon you... that you shall not take a woman for my son from the Canaanite daughters" (Bereishis 23:3).

We see the same thing with Yaakov Avinu. Rikvah says to Yitzchak, "I am disgusted with my own life... if Yaakov takes a woman from the daughters of Cheis such as these of the daughters of the land, why should I have life?" And so Yitzchak immediately calls Yaakov and instructs him: "Do not take a woman from the daughters of Canaan." This instruction even influenced Eisav, as we later read, "And Eisav saw that the daughters of Canaan were evil in the eyes of his father Yitzchak" (Bereishis 28:1-9), and so he got married to Machlas, the daughter of Yishmael, son of Avraham—at least someone from the family.

Now seemingly, we don't find it written anywhere that G-d commanded the Patriarchs to not marry Canaanite women. Rather, the Patriarchs were "chariots" of G-d's Will, as the Sages describe them. They intuitively knew on their own what G-d wanted of them. And indeed, the Torah later expanded the prohibition, not only banning marriage with Canaanite women but allowing marriage with only Jewish women. (See Likutei Sichos Vol. 15 pg. 221.)

here's another example for this.

On the verse, "See that G-d has given to you the Shabbos," the Midrash says: "From where do we know that G-d gave you the Shabbos in Egypt? From the verse that says, 'has given'—it doesn't say, 'is giving' but rather, has already given it to you in Egypt" (Bereishis Rabbasi).

Even before that, the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 79) comments on Yaakov Avinu, saying, “Yaakov observed the Shabbos before it was commanded.” This means that the Patriarchs knew that G-d had created the universe in six days and had rested on the seventh, and so of their own accord, they designated the seventh day of Shabbos as the Day of Rest.

Even after the Jewish Nation had been keeping the Shabbos for many generations, the “cultured” world of each era failed to understand why a day of rest was needed. The Greeks and the Romans at the height of their cultural dominance laughed at and belittled Jews for keeping Shabbos. Entire satires of those ancients were written arguing that a day of rest brought on deterioration and loss of productivity and was traceable back to the fact that Jews are lazy people. They argued that there’s no need for a rest day and that it’s a waste of time. That was coming from a Rome where slaves and servants worked seven days a week and masters didn’t work at all. But with the passage of many generations, the world finally understood the wonderful gift that the Jewish Nation had bequeathed the world.

In like manner, there were always people in one form or another who discerned on their own what the right thing to do was. They weren’t tzadikim and sometimes they weren’t even Jews. But still, they sensed what G-d wanted them to do.

And this, my friends, is the lesson from this week’s Torah portion.

Your name doesn’t have to be Betzalel to be a person who is *b’tzeil kel*—in G-d’s Shadow. Rather, every Jew need to get closer to G-d and His Torah so as to get to the level where he or she intuitively knows what G-d wants of him or her. As is the case with happy marriages, where both husband and wife know what the other wants without him or her having to say so explicitly, so too ideally with the Jew and G-d.

And this, by the way, is also the definition of a Chasid—one who intuitively knows what his Rebbe wants of him. If the Rebbe needs to tell him explicitly, then he has not yet arrived at the level of a true Chasid. A Jew needs to be so connected that he or she feels an “electric current” when he or she does the right thing. Let us hope, pray and work for being able to do what G-d wants because we sense it.