

Making Judaism Convenient

Category: Bamidbar, Naso

Our grandparents made great sacrifices to remain Jewish. But is that situation ideal?

Who Built the Pyramids?

Good Shabbos!

Peace between Israel and its neighbors is always on the news, so I'd like to spend our few minutes together talking about a peace treaty made between Israel and Egypt years ago: the Camp David Accords.

When the Camp David Accords were signed between the two countries, many Jews in Israel saw it as a great cause for celebration—until then, Israeli passport holders were barred entry into Egypt, but now, they too would finally be allowed to visit Egypt.

Many Israelis were very happy that the opportunity was granted to them to visit Egypt's historical sites—to get their photos taken sitting on camels in front of the great pyramids so that they'd have souvenirs from the happy day on which they had the chance to set their feet next to one of the Seven Wonders of the World. They all thirsted to see the places at which our ancestors were forced to do slave labor.

The Rebbe says in a sicha that the historical world tradition is that the pyramids were built by the Jews in Egypt, as slaves who were forced to do slave labor. The Rebbe adds that there is a source for this belief in the verses of the Torah itself, which state, "And they built storage cities for the Pharaoh: Pison and Raamses" (Shmos 1:11), on which Rashi comments: "Strong and fortified for storage," meaning that they were built as some sort of depot. They certainly built them out of solid, strong stone. The Rebbe also points out that several pyramid stones are decorated with carvings depicting slaves bound by ropes pulling huge stones together.

To this day, archaeologists haven't completely figured out exactly how the

pyramids were built without modern-day tools and without electricity. They haven't quite wrapped their brains around how they succeeded in moving huge boulders to such high heights.

And this brings us to this week's Parshah.

The Well-Intentioned Procrastination

This week, we read about the dedication of the Mishkan, the miniature portable temple the Jews carried with them in the desert during their wanderings. At the end of the Torah portion, the Torah tells us about the Nesiim, the 12 leaders of the Tribes of Israel, who were the first to contribute sacrifices to the newly dedicated Mishkan.

Rashi points out that the Nesiim were quick to be the first to dedicate the altar. Why?

He reminds us of what happened when the Jews had organized the "Mishkan Building Fund Campaign" at the time the first collection was being taken up so that the Mishkan could be built.

Moshe Rabbeinu had come down from Mt. Sinai on Yom Kippur day, and the following day he announced that everyone was invited to bring donations for a new temple to be built. Everyone came running and pushing to donate.

The first ones to give were the womenfolk, who were happy to give to the Mishkan. Then came the men. But, strangely enough, it was the Nesiim, the leaders of the community, of all people who tarried and delayed bringing their donations to the Mishkan.

Now, they had good intentions here. They said, "Let's let the community give what they are able to give first, and we'll fill in whatever's missing." But to their surprise, the Jewish Nation gave with such passion that they ended up contributing everything that was needed—so there was nothing left for the Nesiim to give.

Fortunately, as it turned out, there was indeed one thing that the Jews did not have: the stones of the Choshen, the breastplate worn by the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest. And the Nesiim were the ones who ultimately donated these precious

stones.

Now, back in our Parshah, it's six months later on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the first of the month of Nissan, and it had come time to dedicate the Mishkan—but this time, the Nesiim didn't make the same mistake again. This time, they made sure that they'd be the first ones on line.

The Strange Gift

When they arrived to bring the sacrifices for the Mishkan, they also brought with gifts: six wooden wagons and 12 oxen with which to transport the Mishkan during their travels. The Mishkan, as we mentioned, was portable. It was built to be taken apart into pieces so that every time they traveled, they could dismantle it, load it onto the wagons and roll on until their next stop, or until they got to the Holy Land. So the Nesiim decided to donate these transportation vehicles.

But here Rashi says something very interesting: “Moshe didn't accept their gifts until he was ordered to do so by G-d.”

Moshe Rabbeinu never heard any such command from G-d to make transporter wagons. Not only that, but in the beginning of our Torah portion, the Torah tells us explicitly that the Leviim, the members of the Tribe of Levi, were those responsible for stowing the Mishkan themselves: The sons of Gershon would carry the curtains, the sons of Merari would stow the beams, and so on. Nowhere does it even say half a word about wagons—and here, the Nesiim suddenly come along and want to introduce something modern to the Mishkan: wagons!

Those same Jews who built the pyramids out of stones, each of which was far heavier than the beams of the Mishkan, suddenly suggest using wagons to move about the beams of the Mishkan when it comes to the House of G-d!

Instead of the Leviim showing love to their G-d-given duties and carrying the various pieces of the Mishkan on their shoulders, which would have been the greatest honor for them, they instead opt for carrying them on wagons pulled by cattle!

But along came G-d Himself and said to Moshe, “Take it from them, and they shall be used to perform the service of the Mishkan.” For His part, G-d loved the idea.

Why? Because G-d didn't want the Leviim to work hard. On the contrary: the more one could lighten their burden, the better. G-d didn't insist on His own dignity and allowed wagons pulled by cattle to carry the Mishkan—as long as His beloved children wouldn't need to strain themselves.

Take It Easy!

Here we come to the lesson of this week's Parshah.

People often complain that the way in which we do mitzvos in our day and age is not what G-d really intended: Rabbis finding all kinds of loopholes that bend the rules and make life easier?! They argue: It may be true that these innovations are permitted under the dry letter of the law—but they're certainly not in accordance with the spirit of the law, and engaging in these practices seems to cast doubt on our commitment to the Torah's laws in the first place.

For example: "How can you use a timer on Shabbos that turns on and off your house lights?" Or, "How can you use an eiruv?! If you're not allowed to carry on Shabbos, then carrying is forbidden—period! How is it that the rabbis came up with this idea of putting up a string around the city, and suddenly you're allowed to carry?"

Another example of this phenomenon is the Passover industry today.

Today, you can pretty much get a kosher-for-Passover anything at your local kosher supermarket: cakes, cookies and every other goodie you can think of. But when I was a kid, we had the "real Pesach" the way it used to be: We used to eat potatoes and gefilte fish for a week! But today you don't have that limitation anymore—they make everything out of potato starch and other kosher-for-Passover ingredients, and it all tastes almost as good as the real thing.

So along comes the story of the Nesiim in this week's Parshah and teaches us a major and very important lesson: G-d doesn't want His children to do slave labor. It's enough that they had that in Egypt. On the contrary: G-d wants it to be easy for the Jew to observe the Torah and mitzvos. And that's why the closer we get to the Days of Moshiach, the easier and easier it gets to keep the Torah and mitzvos.

It's impossible to compare keeping Shabbos today with all our creature comforts like heaters, air conditioners, refrigerators and modern technology to keeping Shabbos in the shtetl of Europe of old, when everything was much harder and more complicated. It is specifically because of all the technology we have today that it's possible to keep Shabbos in true pleasure.

We're not like the Amish who resist changes and innovations. Quite the contrary—as long as it's permissible according to halachah, we embrace it happily and use it in our service of G-d to the greatest extent possible.

My friends: There's no mitzvah in Judaism to suffer! There is only one mitzvah, really: To do the Will of G-d, and this one must try to do as much as possible—and only then is there a chance that more and more Jews will ultimately keep the Torah and mitzvos.