

Temple Governance Is Sacred Work

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Last week, I told you about my trip with the Chicago rabbis to Rome. This morning, in thinking about my sermon for tonight, I remembered a conversation I had on that trip with one of my colleagues.

Actually, it was the colleague leading our trip—our teacher and rabbi to the rabbis, Yehiel Poupko. Rabbi Poupko is the scholar-in-residence at the Jewish Federation of Chicago. In that role, one of the things Rabbi Poupko gets to do is organize and lead educational tours for rabbis and lay leaders to places of Jewish interest around the world.

I think this is a pretty exciting job, so at one point as we were walking alongside each other, I asked him: “So, how did you get this gig?”

His response was classic Rabbi Poupko, blending intricate Jewish knowledge with a wry sense of humor: “Gig?” he said. “It’s not a ‘gig.’ It’s *avoydas perekh*.”

Avoydas perekh—which Rabbi Poupko pronounced with his characteristic Ashkenazic accent—is a midrashic phrase about our slavery in Egypt. It means “crushing servitude.”

I’ve been chuckling all day thinking about how he said it. Leading a group of Jews as they traipse across the globe—or even when they stay put, for that matter—is, indeed, hard work.

Just ask Moses.

Rabbi Poupko’s remark came to my mind because the beginning of this week’s parashah, Ki Tissa, is about congregational leadership. Not the spiritual and pastoral leadership that we in the clergy do, but the kind of leadership we call “governance”—or “the business side of the congregation.”

The parashah begins with what we might describe as the first system of Temple dues:

“God said to Moses... ‘This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay... a half shekel as an offering to Adonai. Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of 20 years up, shall give Adonai’s offering: The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel...’ ”
(Ex. 30:11-15)

The Mishnah (in the volume called *Shekalim*) explains that these dues—which, it should be noted, are assessed at a flat rate of one-half shekel for every adult member, no matter the size of their bank account—will go to fund both the religious life of the community, such as purchasing ritual items and paying the clergy, *and* the physical maintenance of the Temple, including cleaning up the property and repairing roadways that were damaged during the winter.¹

The Mishnah also specifies a method for collecting dues from the community, including putting controls in place to ensure that no one steals from the treasury or even gives the *appearance* of impropriety in handling the members' money.²

According to rabbinic law, the community must appoint no fewer than seven trustees and three financial officers to administer the business of the Temple.³ And the rabbis emphasize that *any* member of the congregation is eligible to become a trustee.⁴

Every member has an equal share in the work of the Temple. That's why everyone pays the same dues amount of one-half shekel.

Times have surely changed since the ancient Temple stood in Jerusalem. But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Just as in Temple times, modern congregations like ours are organizations that are in the business of serving the spiritual needs of the Jewish people.

Sometimes that's hard for us to swallow. After all, we don't necessarily *want* to think about our synagogue as a business. In fact, sometimes even talking about the business of the synagogue feels strange, even unholy.

For many of us, the synagogue is about spirituality and community and inspiration and the soul, whereas things like collecting dues, paying bills, replacing the HVAC system, negotiating salaries, and balancing budgets belong to another, more mundane realm of life.

It's totally understandable to feel that way. Most of us come to the temple to transcend the day-to-day and focus on things that we find deeper and more meaningful.

Which is why I think it's so interesting and important that the Torah and the Mishnah include all these *halakhot* about temple administration.

The fact that they do so indicates that, even when it came to the majestic *Beit HaMikdash* that stood at the nexus between heaven and earth, governance was an integral part of the enterprise. The *kohen gadol* and his team of priests could not properly serve the community without a board of trustees working behind the scenes to make sure the bills were paid, the staff was compensated, and the parking lot was in good repair.

But the rabbis teach us something even more profound about synagogue governance, too.

By including temple administration, financial management, and building maintenance in the Mishnah—which, after all, our tradition regards as a *sacred* text—the rabbis are telling us that synagogue governance is itself a portal to holiness and spirituality. Tending to the business of the temple—no less than going to Friday night services or helping out at the food pantry—is a form of *avodah*, service to God.

Those who volunteer their time and expertise to manage the business of Temple Beth-El deserve our deep appreciation; because, by doing what they do in the boardroom, they ensure that we can do everything we do in this chapel and beyond.

The countless hours they spend in board meetings, and on Zoom calls with our professional team, and in conversation with all kinds of vendors and community partners all go to helping us be the best possible synagogue for our members that we can be.

You may not see them at Friday night services every week, but I can promise you that every single one of them is showing up with their whole self to do the holy *avodah* which we rely on them to do.

But, to borrow Rabbi Poupko's phrase, the *avodah* of temple governance can easily become *avoydas perekh*, crushing servitude.

That's because managing the business of the synagogue sometimes requires making hard decisions—and, to quote one of my childhood rabbis: "As in the days of Moses, our people murmur."⁵

As you know, a few months ago, our board of trustees launched a strategic-planning process to plan for the future of Temple Beth-El. We are blessed to be led in this work by a team of congregants who know this community inside and out and who love our congregation with their entire being.

I cannot overstate the importance of the work they are doing.

We began with a two-day retreat with the full board of trustees, facilitated by an experienced business-planning consultant, during which we examined our challenges and opportunities and began to chart a vision for Temple Beth-El's next 100 years.

Over the course of the last three months, our leadership team has been meeting weekly to set objectives and review our progress.

I am very excited to say that the process is moving along very well. We are doing the work that needs to be done, and we are well positioned to secure a vibrant and healthy future for our congregation right here in Great Neck.

For my part, I want to tell you that I love this congregation and I'm optimistic and excited about our future. Temple Beth-El is my home and my family's home, and I plan to work alongside our outstanding lay leadership every step of the way for the long-term.

Make no mistake about it: It is going to take a lot of work by a lot of dedicated people. And there will be some hard decisions to make.

I am confident that we can and will succeed in this *avodah* as long as we support each other and remember we're on the same team. We all want Temple Beth-El to flourish for many years to come, and it's through this strategic planning that we're going to get there.

So, tonight, I want to invite you to *help* us succeed.

Let's all try to be our highest and best selves in our interactions with each other.

Share your thoughts and feedback with our trustees. Ask questions. Be concerned, and be kind.

Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Let's remember that one of Judaism's most important *mitzvot* is "*hava'at shalom bein adam la-chavero*—to bring peace between people."

Our trustees are showing up every day of the week with their whole selves and with one goal and one goal *only*: to serve the people and the institution of Temple Beth-El in the best way they possibly can.

This is *avodah*—sacred work, divine service.

God forbid that guiding the business of the temple should become *avoydas perekh* for our lay leaders.

Instead, they need our patience, our support, our appreciation, and our trust.

Because these fellow congregants who do the business of the synagogue—like Moses, Miriam, Aaron, and Joshua—*they're* the ones who are going to lead us through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

1 M. *Shekalim*, ch. 1

2 *Ibid.*, ch. 2

3 *Ibid.*, 5:2

4 Tosefta, *Shekalim* (Lieberman) 2:15

5 Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, "The Faithful Shepherd," sermon delivered to the HUC-JIR ordination class of 1960.