

Parashat Bo 2010 – The Constitution & the Torah – Sacred Documents that Shaped Nations

It is not often that I flashback to memories of Saturday morning cartoons while reading the newspaper on-line, but that's exactly what happened Thursday. I was reading the paper I clicked on a link that brought me to a video taken Thursday in the United States House of Representatives, where 135 lawmakers took turns reading passages from the United States Constitution. As the new Speaker of the House John Boehner stood up and began to read the preamble to the Constitution, in my head I distinctly heard the sounds of School House Rock – In 1787 I'm told our founding fathers did agree, to write a list of principles for keeping people free. We the people in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, and ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

That is, a generation ago, when I was a child, it was assumed that every child in America should not only get a little help in understanding math, science, grammar, history, and economics while watching T.V., they should also be given lessons in civics and the basic tools to recognize the uniqueness of this country. I remember going around singing songs from Schoolhouse Rock such as the "Preamble" and "I'm a Bill" as a child. This week though, instead of being able to feel good or proud while contemplating the Constitution, I read several articles, and heard numerous audio clips of people actively making fun of those who would dare to suggest that the Constitution, which our lawmakers swear to uphold, would God forbid be read aloud in the House of Representatives. Political theater, a waste of time, flat out stupid; all of those are descriptions I either read or heard about what I personally believe was a significant exercise by our legislators this week.

The fact is that reading the Constitution should not be controversial. It is the founding document of this great country. If we are to remain a great country we must remind ourselves on a regular basis what the founding tenets of this country are. That is because of the simple truth that while history may be in the past we can never really put our history in the past. Our history, our knowledge of our history, is a tool we come back to over and over in order to understand today.

That is the lesson we learn in this week's Torah portion *parashat Bo*. The parashah contains the final three plagues – locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn - that God sent to punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians for their refusal to free our ancestors the Israelites. In addition, the portion is the source text for many of our ritual observances each year at Passover.

We read in the portion: "*Ushmartem et ha-davar ha-zeh l'chok-l'cha ul'vanecha ad-olam*. You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this rite?" You shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because HE passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses."

On this verse our Etz Hayim Humash says: “The passage of time never diminishes the significance of the events. The national culture is nurtured by their memory and by their repeated re-enactment, a theme later stressed in the *Pesach Haggadah*.”

That is what took place on Thursday, a national reenactment of the major themes of the Constitution. And while it is true that certain parts of the Constitution were not read, not necessarily because they were deemed offensive, but because they have been overwritten by amendments, it is still a sacred text in its entirety.

This is true too of the Torah. There are many parts of the Torah that make people slightly uncomfortable today – such as Simeon and Levi murdering the people of Schechem, the teaching that you stone a rebellious child, that you stone one who violates the Sabbath, or a person who commits adultery. Those texts may make us squirm, but they are part of our history, and we must understand them in their historical context if we are to understand where we have come from and where we want to go.

Not only do we reenact the story of the Exodus each year at Passover, we actually reenact the giving of the Torah every single week during the Torah service. The bimah is elevated to remind us of Mount Sinai, a lone voice chants the words of the Torah, just as God’s voice called out to the people and to Moses. This reenactment links us actively to the past and simultaneously links us to the future.

For this reason I was profoundly touched on Thursday to see so many of our elected leaders – both Democrat and Republican - read from our most sacred American text. Growing up I was taught by my Holocaust survivor father two things – be proud to be a Jew and be proud to be an American. He and my mother taught me and all of my siblings to love this country as much as we love our Judaism, and I feel blessed to have been able to witness – albeit on-line – a first ever event take place this Thursday.

In today’s world, where it seems people are always eager to disagree with one another, I hope there is one thing that we can all agree on. I hope that we can all agree how truly blessed we are to live in a country where we can practice our religion freely and in safety, and where anyone, of any race or religion, can be a citizen and use their rights as a citizen to make this country ever greater and to be a light unto the nations of what is possible when all are truly free.