

## Proclaim Respect Throughout the Land - On the Jubilee and Public Prayer D'var Torah - May 9, 2014



A replica of the Liberty Bell in Jerusalem's Liberty Bell Park (Gan Pa'amon HaDror) which was founded in 1976.

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof." Those words from Leviticus Chapter 25 Verses 10, inscribed on the Liberty Bell, have served for over 200 years as a beacon leading us to claim our individual rights as Americans and to throw off the yoke of tyranny of a ruler from a distant shore or a far away city.

What we don't often consider is that the actual meaning of the word translated as liberty, D'ROR, is "release." It is used in that verse which established that the jubilee year would occur every 50 years on the ancient Israelite calendar. Jubilee comes from the Hebrew word YOVEIL, which actually means a

blast of the shofar. The shofar sounded the call to begin a special time when slaves could go free, debts would be forgiven, and land would go back to its previous owners.

The Eitz Chayim Torah commentary notes that the jubilee year was intended to prevent society from turning into a two-tiered system of "haves" and "have-nots." It explained: "Behind this plan are two religious assumptions. Because all the earth and all of its inhabitants belong to God, human beings cannot possess either the land or people in perpetuity. And no human being should be condemned to permanent servitude." This practice was not as much economic as it was spiritual. It hoped to restore a sense of unity among all people under God in a community and to bolster self-respect for those overcome with poverty and with a sense of failure.

Later in Leviticus Chapter 25, the basis for godly behavior is clearly defined: "Do not wrong or persecute one another, but fear your God: I the Eternal am your God." The rabbis applied this verse to all types of commerce and transactions. They further asserted that this passage teaches us that we shouldn't wrong other people with harmful words, no matter what the context.

As we live our lives as citizens of our city, state and nation, we often think about rights - our freedom to do what we believe we should be able to do. We also think about our responsibilities to follow laws and rules that assure that we will treat each other with decency,

respect and fairness. The belief that everything and everyone belongs to God can take our views about law and even politics to a higher level. We can work for the greater good by focusing on how common ground and interests unite us, and how we can realize the hope that all people will be able to reach a level of subsistence and personal well-being. The Torah, in its own way, creates a path to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for all of us - "we, the people." Cognitive linguist George Lakoff cited these values as central to the vision that created our country when he said, "American democracy is based on empathy — citizens caring about other citizens and working through their government to provide public resources for all." Israelite society accepted as a mitzvah the need to provide everyone a feeling that they would find help, connection and support in their communities in times of both prosperity and challenge.

One might think, with such a broad vision expressed in Leviticus Chapter 25, that calling upon God would naturally lead to unity.

We know, all too well, how the presence of many faiths in our country has been a source of both strength and conflict. The strength is the great potential to learn about each other's traditions and to be enriched by that knowledge. The conflict comes when one religious viewpoint seems to be favored over another.

That was the feeling of the plaintiffs in *Greece NY vs. Galloway*, the case decided Monday this week by the Supreme Court in favor of allowing an overwhelming majority of the prayers at town council meetings to be Christian in their wording and expression. In a statement following the decision, Rabbi David Saperstein of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center commented: "Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy noted that requiring invocations to be nonsectarian would call on the legislatures sponsoring these prayers and the courts to intervene and 'act as supervisors and censors of religious speech.' Yet, Justice Kennedy did suggest there were limits to such prayers, among them: denigrating non-believers or religious minorities, threatening damnation, or preaching conversion—leaving courts in exactly the same role as line-drawers."

I see this decision as one that ignores the importance of one person being considerate of another in a public setting. At the New Mexico State University Interfaith Council, we apply these standards to our opening and closing prayers: any particularistic language is prefaced with the pronoun "I" rather than "we." We always acknowledge the presence of believers in a variety of traditions. The sentiments in the body of almost all of the prayers we offer are expressive of common and universal hopes and feelings.

That was not the case in Greece, New York. It is not the case in many halls of government, where clergy and others are free to offer sectarian prayers filled with themes that narrowly apply only to one religion. Invocations or benedictions that assume that all people present are members of one faith community automatically disparage those who are not part of that circle of belief.

From my own experiences with this very issue, I have chosen to use, in my public prayer, the most universal language possible from the Jewish tradition. Fortunately, we have many choices for names of God and for sentiments to express that easily apply to everyone.

Tomorrow, I will be delivering the invocation at the NMSU afternoon graduation after leading our Shabbat morning service here. I chose to take part because I felt that there is a special message that our heritage can add to such a gathering. Based loosely on a blessing from the Talmud, here is the prayer I will share tomorrow:

*Spirit of the universe, Eternal Source of wisdom, we thank You for the knowledge you have implanted within us, and which always seeks to express itself in daily life.*

*As we celebrate this time of achievement, which is both an ending and a beginning for faculty and students, parents and children, we ask for the perseverance to achieve our highest goals. May our ideals persist in our work towards a world filled with greater justice, peace and equality.*

*May our hearts be filled with understanding.*

*May our mouths give expression to insights that will enable us to live by the values we prize.*

*May our eyes shine with the light of continued learning.*

*May our ears remain sensitive to the cries of those in need.*

*May our hands work for peace and harmony among all people.*

*May our feet follow pathways that will lead us to a future filled with hope.*

*May we be always be favored with nourishment for body, mind and soul that will sustain us all and help us grow as individuals and as members of the family of humanity.*

And my prayer for us as we read this section from the Torah is this: that we remember and understand that our individual rights carry with them sacred public responsibilities to preserve our land, to work for the well-being of our fellow citizens, to support people in need so that they will no longer be in need, and to act as God's partners in maintaining and renewing daily the works of creation.

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