

**"How Do We Keep the Fire Burning without Doing Damage?
Living a Life of Commitment without Imposing Ourselves on Others"**

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If there has been one staple of Israeli politics for the past decade, it has been Benjamin Netanyahu. Unlike his brother Yonatan, Netanyahu is known not for a single act of bravery, but for a constant and consistent path forward with a singular agenda. Once again, this eloquent clear minded, strong leader has emerged as Israel's Prime Minister. After nearly two months of grinding negotiations, Mr. Netanyahu has a healthy majority of 74 seats in Israel's 120-seat Parliament. The parties in the coalition have very different views on the economy, religious-secular issues and the peace process.

To recruit allies and keep his party on board, Mr. Netanyahu created new ministries, splitting existing ones and appointing a number of ministers without portfolio. He promised millions of dollars in social-welfare spending, tailored to each party's constituency. Opposition lawmakers say the government's size is fiscally irresponsible and the coalition is too diverse to succeed. "This government is about political survival only and can't tackle any of the big issues facing Israel, because if it does it will fall," said Yohanan Plesner, a lawmaker from the opposing Kadima Party.

However, this opposition is dwarfed by the singular agenda and most starkly brought into focus when Netanyahu forcefully remarked, "The greatest danger to mankind and to the State of Israel is that a radical regime will be armed with nuclear weapons." (WSJ April 1, 2009)

The two lessons we learn most clearly from this latest bizarre development in the formation of this particular government and in building the Jewish state, is that compromise and tolerance are critical but no less important than a singular focus on survival.

While putting together this government, Netanyahu once again showcased talents of persuasion that have long been underestimated by his political rivals. With the power of his tongue, he was able to accomplish an extraordinary feat. He brought together a true incarnation of a team of rivals, but I suppose that is the new slogan *du jour*. Coalition building is Israel's version of bipartisanship, and this is based on one simple word. "Tolerance." The only problem is we have lost a real deep sense of broadmindedness and traded it for superficial agreement. It is the difference between acceptance that doesn't care, and commitment to real substantive tolerance.

There is tolerance that doesn't care or tolerance that just looks the other way and goes about its own business. Then there is compassionate tolerance, the kind that recognizes the other person's right to grow, his need to travel along a path and get there on his own. Who is there when he gets lost? Compassion has room for a thousand private journeys but it takes time, promise, and stamina.

You have no doubt heard this joke because I have told it a hundred times. A mother walks into her son's room and tells him it's time to get up and go to services. The son whines at her explaining he is too tired and he wants to sleep in just this one *shabbos*. To which his mother

responds, “I am sorry but you have to go.” This time the boy pulls the covers over his head and says I refuse. The mother growing more impatient pulls the covers down and demands that he get out of bed, get dressed and go. At this point, very bothered, the boy asks, “Why?” “To which the mother responds, “Because you are the rabbi.”

You see, showing up is most of the battle. Just being there, just continuing on, just plowing forward is sometimes the hardest part of the fight. A few weeks ago I was speaking with a woman who lost her son. She told me of the advice that she received from another woman who had also lost her child. It was simple and straightforward. Get out of bed every morning. Just getting out of bed, when the world seems to be crashing down, is winning the struggle. Every day put one foot in front of the other. Every day keep the light burning.

Aish tamid tukad al hamizbeach, lo tichbeh. “A perpetual fire on the altar shall be kept burning and not go out.” (6:6) As our Humash points out, this sentence has long served as a reminder of the need to keep our devotion constant. In order to make sure we keep the faith, our faith needs to be tended to. We need to stoke the fire and care for our faith regularly. All of the analogies apply. A fire that is not watched can go out, or it can easily turn into an inferno. We need to care for our faith, making sure it never goes out, while limiting its force so that it doesn’t burn out of control. This analogy seems to suggest it is all within our own hands. On some level we must believe this. We must take control of our lives and decide that, regardless of the difficulty we find, we must continue forward. Whether we’re struggling with our health, our finances, our relationships or ourselves, we have to believe that we have the capacity to weather the storm. We must say to ourselves what Jews have said for centuries, “*Gam zeh ya’avor*,” “This too shall pass.” You have to be willing to see it through even though it can feel very isolating. No one else can truly understand your particular struggle, but know you are not alone.

As we come to learn later, “It came forth from God’s presence.” (9:24). We must be able to sit back and ask God, “What do you have in store for me? How will I ever get through this?” Then answer ourselves with the words of the Psalmist who asked, “*Esa anai el he’harim, maiyin yavo ezri*,” “I lit mine eyes to the mountain and ask from where will my help come?” “*Ezri me’im hashem*,” “My help comes from God.” So, once again, our sages offer us the wisdom that this partnership kept the fire continuously burning for 116 years. However, faith is a powerful force and easily burns out of control, so the rabbis offer a warning.

The Midrash points out, “The copper sheathing of the altar never melted and its wooden core was not charred.” (Leviticus Rabbah 7:5) (quoted in *The Torah a Modern Commentary*, page 783) There is something magnificent about this idea; something almost magical about a flame that never goes out yet leaves no negative impact.

Our tradition says we can maintain a belief system that doesn’t hurt others. Recently much has been said about how much pain and suffering has been inflicted on this world by religion and much has been written about the harmful effects of faith. Anticipating this charge, our Midrash says, “No.” My faith doesn’t, shouldn’t impose itself on yours and the space that houses the difference between what I believe and what you believe is called tolerance. To which I again remind you.

There is tolerance that doesn't care, tolerance that just looks the other way and goes about its own business. Then there is compassionate tolerance. The kind that recognizes the other person's right to grow, his need to travel along a path and get there on his own. Where is he when he gets lost? Compassion has room for a thousand private journeys and it takes time, promise, and stamina.

Every day we are surrounded by examples of people who, in the name of God, behave rightly, justly, and kindly. We also have an equivalent number of opposite examples, but history has shown us the potency of faith. Just two weeks ago, Rabbi David Wolpe offered us his newest book called, "Why Faith Matters," in which he explains that faith brings great gifts and potential misuses. He spoke beautifully of the great good that has been offered to the world in the name of God, all the while recognizing the incredible destruction of the 20th century brought about because of ideologies that were Godless. He spoke of Communism, Fascism and Nazism.

In a compelling statement, Rabbi Wolpe argues that more violence has occurred while fighting religion, than in the name of religion, yet each and every one of those religions survived. Maybe that's the greatest miracle of all. He writes, "The deepest experience of God has never been in conquest, but in compassion, community, holiness and humble goodness. Inside every human being is a battle against pettiness and malice that lives through our character. The battle is often lost, but religion, at the very least, knows that it must be fought and should be fought each day of our lives." (page 80)

"[Should] be fought each day of our lives." Rabbi David Wolpe lets us know that there is a struggle every day but we have no choice but to forge forward and to continue on.

A few weeks ago, Rabbi David Wolpe served as our Scholar-in-Residence and he taught us many things over the course of the weekend. He is brilliant and eloquent, the son of a brilliant and eloquent father. Much of what he said resonates regularly in my head. His comment Saturday evening was perfect. While honoring his mother and father, he said, "It takes a Gerry Wolpe to describe Gerry Wolpe." Even more notable was the story he told about one particular letter his father wrote to him while he was away at summer camp. His father wrote, "What separates the men from the boys is stamina." Though I am not sure what the context of that comment was, I can imagine it had something to do with being homesick and not being sure of whether or not he could last the summer. The lesson is not simply a lesson reserved for summer camp; it is a lesson for life. What makes a great athlete is not the web gem or the highlight. What makes a great athlete is the ability to repeat the same shot over and over again. What makes a great scientist is not the invention or the discovery. It is designing the instrument, the apparatus that will permit consistent forward motion. What makes a great politician is not the one eloquent speech or the first 100 days in office, it is showing up for the votes time after time.

This week we will sit together to celebrate the holiday of Passover. We will gather around the seder tables and retell the story of our survival. At the very end of the seder, we will say, "*Lishana haba b'yerushalyim,*" next year in Jerusalem. Implicit in that statement is that we will be around next year. Much of the story we tell on Passover will not just be about miracle and plagues, but it will be about survival. May we all continue to be blessed with the desire to continue on when struggles exist. May we have the ability to celebrate when we overcome them.