

**Saskatchewan Prayer Breakfast
Wednesday April 12, 2017
Guest Speaker Rabbi Jeremy Parnes**

Your Honour, Distinguished Platform Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As I stand before you this morning, we continue to be inundated with news of terror, people fleeing for their lives, and visions of horror around the world. It is foremost on my mind, not least because of the number of souls that I have spoken with who are deeply concerned about the nature of our world today. They see the darkness and are looking for a way to the light.

To make matters worse, the human response to those victims desperate to find a safe haven is at best mixed.

We hear of protests and outrage at the idea of welcoming refugees. We see the plight of the most vulnerable as they are prevented from entering or are forced to leave supposedly free countries. We hear daily of acts against Jews, Muslims, Christians, indeed of many faiths, across the globe.

There are, also, numerous acts of kindness and compassion, but they seem to share less of the spotlight. There are those making a difference and many more who want to help but are fearful of the result. Questions are raised. Here at home, when we bring new immigrants, concerns arise: Are we opening the door to those who would ultimately be our enemy? When we promote religious freedom allowing Muslims to wear the Hijab, or Jews to wear a Kippah (head covering like mine), or Sikhs to wear a Turban, are we giving in to their practices and sacrificing our Canadian way of life?

As a country, Canada is seen as open and free. We are universally loved and appreciated for our welcoming spirit. And as such, these questions, I would argue, are valid and reasonable when done for the right reasons. Critical inquiry undertaken with a genuine desire to understand is how we continue to build our community with each other and our new citizens. In Judaism, we say, in effect, that arguments undertaken for the sake of heaven are good arguments. Discussions of this kind undertaken not to control or alienate but to help to educate and improve life are essential.

Historically, we have welcomed among us new immigrants from desperate circumstances and that is wonderful. But there is a difference; earlier immigration was primarily of people from a European background. I myself am a first generation Canadian from Britain. Today, we are a much more diverse population.

The question that I have as we celebrate 150 years of Confederation is

“How will we now go forward into the next 150 years accommodating, supporting, and flourishing in an even greater multi-cultural, multi-faith reality than we experienced before? Better yet. How will we do this in such a way as to be a shining example to other nations around the world?”

To this question I would like to suggest two answers.

First, as I stand here this morning, Jews around the world are celebrating Pesach/Passover – which marks the freeing of the Children of Israel from slavery. This is the freedom festival.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the past Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth and 2016 recipient of the Templeton Prize, observes that on that fateful eve some 3300 years ago, just before the moment of freedom “Moses, their leader had gathered them together and prepared to address them. What, asks Rabbi Sacks, would he speak about at this fateful juncture? The birth of a people? He could have spoken about many things. He might have talked about liberty, the breaking of their chains, and the end of slavery. He might have spoken about the destination to which they were about to travel, ‘Eretz zavat chalav u’dvash/a land flowing with milk and honey.’ He did none of these things. Instead he spoke about children, and the distant future, and the duty to pass the memory of freedom from slavery on to generations yet unborn”

“When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony...” (Exodus 12:26)

And indeed, that is what we do and have done through the generations for 3 1/2 millennia. To this day, it is estimated that more than 80% of Jewish households

observe the Passover festival, recounting the story to our children and educating them about what freedom is.

To clarify, freedom is not the freedom to do what you want, as one young student of mine once suggested. That is anarchy. Freedom is to do what one **ought** to do. With freedom comes responsibility for **all** our citizens, old and new alike.

I am reminded of the late great Peter Gzowski, who ran a contest on his radio show to find this country's equivalent of "as American as apple pie." The winning entry was "as Canadian as possible under the circumstances."

Moses' charge, points out Rabbi Sacks, to the Israelite slaves on the eve of their freedom was to become a country of educators. We Canadians need to be educators telling the stories of why our families left their homes and how they came to this country: reliving the challenges of a harsh and unrelenting environment, telling of the original peoples of this land and how we learned from them. We need to teach our youth not to be merely tolerant of others (PAUSE) but rather, respectful and supportive.

The second answer to the question of how we will move forward together was also inspired by Torah/The Five Books of Moses and the lessons of Habitat for Humanity.

In 1992, I was given the honor, through my Rotary club, of being a part of the committee that brought the Regina Chapter of Habitat for Humanity (A Christian Ministry), to Regina and in 1993, we undertook our first Habitat build. It was a total success. In five days, we saw a house, that just a few months before was only a dream, become a finished reality ready for a family to move in. Since 1993, I have had the distinct pleasure of seeing many such builds, and in 1998, as President of Habitat Regina, I witnessed the Ed Schreyer build of 6 houses completed in just five days. I am delighted to say that Habitat continues here and around the world.

Every year at the build we would start on the first morning with prayer and the words from Psalm 90:17:

<p>וַיְהִי, נָעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ-- עָלֵינוּ: וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ, כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ; וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ, כּוֹנְנָהוּ.</p>	<p>17 And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us; establish Thou also upon us the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.</p>
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And then, we would begin the work. There are many lessons that could be gleaned from each build, and how it changed the lives of the families who benefitted. How they became a part of helping other families as a result. How the surrounding neighbors, who may not at first have been so positive about this sudden influx of volunteers and new neighbors, became totally impacted in the most positive of ways, and how they ended up contributing freely themselves.

Helping families with a hand up rather than a hand out has always been inspiring. Helping people to help themselves is, without question, the right way. Having them go on to help others and help build community is amazing.

For me, the real magic of Habitat was watching 40 volunteers on the first morning of the build descend on the site and start building. These people did not know each other. They filled the 900 square feet of space almost completely. Some focused on the framing work, others the wiring or the plumbing. Some installed the insulation and so on. The reality is that to complete a five-day build on time and with good workmanship takes some serious choreographing. One wrong step or someone not pulling their weight and it doesn't happen. These souls had never before worked together. They each came from diverse backgrounds and faiths and cultures, and yet no one got in each other's way. No one was seen to argue or disagree. Everyone simply got on with the work and everyone was happy in that work:

“And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us;
establish Thou also upon us the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.”

And then I realized that I had seen this same result somewhere else. In fact, Jews around the world have at this time been reading about this concept for the past several weeks in the book of Exodus. It relates to the building of the Mishkan/The Portable Sanctuary in the wilderness.

This building project takes several hundred verses recounting the exact measurements and materials used for the purpose. It was designed to be built so that V'asu Li Mikdash v'Shachanti B'tocham/And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8).

Here is the story leading up to the building of the sanctuary. The Israelites have been enslaved and made to undertake backbreaking labor. Their lot is desperate when Moses is charged by the Holy One of Blessing with the task of delivering the message from God to Pharaoh "to let my people go." After a series of miraculous events, the Pharaoh finally agrees to free the Israelite slaves. Rabbi Sacks states:

"Two things are striking about the people Moses leads out of slavery to freedom. First they are divided into 12 tribes or clans. The Torah emphasizes this at every point. They are not yet united into an overarching sense of identity. The second is that they include a mixed multitude (Exodus 12:38), a heterogeneous group who were not ethnically Israelites. Moses was faced, in other words, with a problem not unlike that of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural states. Indeed, not a lot unlike the challenge that Canada now faces."

Rabbi Sacks continues:

"What is equally striking as the narrative unfolds is that the Israelites lack the moral maturity to become a free nation. At every stage, they complain. They do so after Moses' initial intervention makes their burden worse (5:21). They do so again as they come to the Reed Sea (14:11-12). After the crossing of the sea they twice complain about the lack of water (15:23-24; 17:2), and again about the lack of food (16:2-3). This is not yet a people of faith, of trust in God, of responsibility and restraint. They cannot see beyond the present. And this is the people who had just witnessed the ten plagues and the division of the sea, among the greatest miracles in history.

What happens next is the revelation at Mount Sinai, an unprecedented event ... And this is followed by the people making a golden calf!!! The people had become a rabble. What more needs to happen to such a people before they are transformed into a cohesive group with a sense of identity and mission?"

“It is at this point,” states Rabbi Sacks, “that Moses commands the people to construct the Tabernacle – and this is the stroke of genius. It is as if God says to Moses: If you want to create a group with a sense of collective identity, get them to build something together. It is not what happens to us, but what we do together that gives identity and responsibility. What transformed the Israelites,” he says, “is not what God did for them but what they did for God.”

As long as God was doing the work they complained. During the building of the Tabernacle, there were no quarrels, no complaints.

We Canadians are not slaves. We have enjoyed our rights and freedoms for many years and that may be our potential problem. We have enjoyed freedom for so long that we risk taking it for granted. Are we teaching our children what freedom really is and what the alternative looks like? Are we ready to stand together as a shining example to the rest of the world ready to show what an ideal multi-cultural, multi-faith community looks like? I believe that we are, and it is in fact what we are doing.

May we merit God’s favor in achieving this worthy goal.

But we cannot take any of this for granted.

In the words of singer Joni Mitchell: “Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone They paved paradise put up a parking lot.

Thank you.