

**PEJE Donor & Leadership Assembly Joint Luncheon**  
**February 3, 2003**  
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When Adar enters, our rejoicings must increase....Ta'anit 29a

The Sages teach us, when the month of Adar arrives, it is incumbent upon the Jews that they see the darkness of winter ending, and look forward to the brightness and celebration of the miracle of Purim that is coming. No matter how grey a day in Adar, we must look through the gloom and build toward rejoicing. And as today is Rosh Hodesh Adar, and despite the fact that the Paxutawny Phil saw his shadow, which indicates a prolonged winter, I must begin by celebrating, so let me begin with us, with our congregation...who we are, what we stand for, and the very fact that we do just that--that we stand together, here and now, linked by our common commitment to an agenda that truly matters--we are the builders and strengtheners of day schools; we are building the schools, and recruiting the teachers, shaping the curriculum, governing the Boards in order to educate our children, Jewish children all across this great, free nation of America...

Gathered today in several different places, physically, here in the garden, upstairs in the ballroom; we are different individuals, from related worlds, some funders, some lay leaders, some communal professionals, from every spectrum of the Jewish nation. That we are gathered together as a kahal, as a community of common purpose is in itself a very important accomplishment worthy of celebration...Today is therefore a day of simcha, of rejoicing, and on behalf of the leaders of this extraordinary partnership, may I raise my voice humbly and congratulate you, each and every one who is such a vital part of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education? What you do, what we do, is sacred work, and the results we have achieved to date are nothing short of extraordinary...

As builders of Jewish institutions, we should be inspired to notice that this week's Torah portion, Parshat Terumah, begins the long narrative which occupies the latter half of Sefer Shmot, the book of Exodus--the narrative which describes the building of a central Jewish institution, the Mishkan, or holy Tabernacle that a generation of men and women newly redeemed from the darkness of slavery built in the midst of a harsh, bright desert thousands of years ago... As a builder with you of contemporary Jewish institutions, the wisdom of the Mishkan narrative is moving to me...especially as the Torah chooses to commence the Mishkan narrative by focusing its first instructions, its first emphasis, on the un-named men and women who are the builders...The parsha begins

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel (THE WHOLE NATION OF REDEEMED SLAVES IN THE DESERT IS TO HEAR THIS INSTRUCTION), **and they shall take to Me terumah, from every man whose heart will motivate him, you shall take My terumah..**

Terumah: 25 1:9

Rashi, the medieval French Biblical exegete par excellence, explains this command from G-d to the people in language we as donors understand. Rashi renders "They shall take for me

terumah,” as “They should set some of their money aside for Me as a contribution.” In the desert, institution building depended on donors.

Rashi notes with interest that the word “terumah” appears three times in the full phrasing of this command. He explains that the Torah repeated the word three times, as demonstrating that in order to build the Mishkan, three separate kinds of contributions were called for from the nation--two obligatory, and one voluntary. The voluntary contribution is the one that strikes me, in the context of this donor assembly. This contribution was given by “every person whose heart will motivate him;” Rashi says that “Each individual gave as much as his heart moved him to...” and in terms of this giving, the Tora details a long list of materials that constitute this voluntary terumah--gold, silver, copper, turquoise wool, purple wool, scarlet wool, linen, and goats’ hair; ram skins dyed red, techashim skins, shittim wood, oil, spices, and special stones.

I think the point is that the list of contributions is long and variegated...and so was the list of anonymous contributors, people whose hearts motivated them to give in order to build this central Jewish institution...In order to build Jewish institutions, a Mishkan in the desert, or truly excellent day schools in America, we need a long list of different materials, from curriculum to teacher training, from board development to financial resources, and in order to develop these materials, we need a committed congregation of leaders whose hearts will motivate them to give, time, money, expertise...

Think about what Rashi teaches, and look at the congregation gathered here today, in a place that is physically beautiful, full of bright sun and hopefulness, but let no one be deluded for a moment--while the scenery is lush, we are, as a small group of committed partners, very much “bamidbar”--in the desert, very much in the middle of the night when it comes to building excellence in Jewish education in America. While we should absolutely celebrate the fact that we are here, and that we have answered the command, that we have given as our hearts have motivated us, whether money, or time, whether as donors or as board members of day schools, as leaders from the Federations, professionals from BJE’s, --our hearts have responded, but for all that has been done to build a network of powerful, excellent Jewish day schools, filled with eager students, led by dedicated, honored and extraordinary teachers, teaching world class curriculum, for all that we’ve individually and collectively brought forward as builders of these institutions, the building process is nowhere near complete.

Now on some level, it is fair to ask, fair especially for you who have done so much already to ask, So What that the work is not completed? I’ve done my part... Even if the mission is incomplete, on some level, so what?

Do we really understand the day school in the architecture of the Jewish nation? In this day, in this age...when our existence as a people is threatened...both from within, and without, why should the day school movement why should the pursuit not just of schools, but of truly excellent institutions of Jewish learning be so central to the Jewish nation?

I want to tell you a little about why the incompleteness of our mission matters to me and to Debbie, part of the reason we were motivated to join the extraordinary men and women who established PEJE as the original, founding partners. For me, it is always personal, and in terms

of day school education, the same is true--I am not sure I could have understand the command of Terumah in terms of day school, until our sons were born...but I do understand the commandment to give of time and money to building day schools, now that our sons are growing up as Jews in their day schools--our eldest son at 14 is a freshman at the Maimonides School in Boston, a proud graduate of the SSDS where his two brothers are growing up strong and secure as Jews...Debbie and I believe in day schools, not as an abstract reality, but as a visceral part of how we are raising our sons...Debbie has been a lay leader at SSDS for years, and is currently the President of the Board...and I remember when we were first time parents at the school, when Rabbi Elkin first visited with us to begin to involve us in institution building...You'll see, he said...and Josh, we see...

Josh, in some ways we never saw it more clearly than during a very recent to trip to Prague in the Czech Republic. I've been traveling a ton, and so Debbie agreed to the unusual--we would take the kids, she'd reschedule her busy life, and the family would accompany Dad on his business trip to Prague. After all, we'd heard lots about how beautiful and historical the city was, and about the famed Jewish Quarter--would be part adventure, part family learning. And so, we went.

And as Debbie took the kids around the city, led by a Jewish guide, she and the kids saw physical beauty, but they also saw the darkness of anti-Semitism, almost everywhere they went--from the famous clock tower that thousands of tourists stop regularly to admire--Daniel, who had read "Merchant of Venice" in the 8th grade was the first to notice the figure of the miser Jew featured prominently on this contemporary tourist attraction. And on the famed Charles Bridge, it was our 7th grader who gasped to discover an enormous statue of the crucifixion, adorned with gilded Hebrew letters, and learned the story of the Jew forced by the enlightened leaders of this oh so beautiful city to erect a cross and write a Biblical verse out in golden letters, in order to be humiliated...It was Debbie who noticed that while there is a kosher restaurant in Prague, it is not for the local community, but for the Jewish tourists who come to visit...because the local Jewish community is not hardly a Jewish community at all...we saw the shul, despite the water damage, that lists the names of the 80,000 souls murdered by the Nazis...we saw the historic and beautiful shuls which are not shuls, but are in fact museums, because no one davens there anymore...and we mourned, mourned for the community that once was, and mourned for the community that is not...

Yet through the darkness of what we saw, there was light for us, there was a kind of response of hopefulness...that response for was my sons...they were offended by the cross with the Hebrew letters, not just because they could read the Hebrew, but because they knew the Biblical verse...our Jewishly literate, who toured the famous Jewish graveyard of Prague were interested to visit the Maharal's grave, they knew the Maharal's story, and not just about the mythical golem who was supposed to save the Jews--no, they knew about the Maharal as a Torah scholar, they knew a little of his Torah, and they believed, as I do, that it was just that--the Maharal's role as teacher and Jewish educator, not as myth maker or story teller--that was and is the key to Prague, and to the Jewish world everywhere. The boys know that they have more than a heritage, more than just a historical sense of what once was--they have instead a clear sense of what Judaism is a live, living reality...and every Jewish kid needs this grounding, needs this sense of pride and identity and the tools that come from learning Jewishly and about Judaism as

a living breathing reality....Good to know what Shakespeare had to say about love and family relationships and what it means to be Jewish in Merchant of Venice--but it is better for our children to know what the Rambam had to say about the same issues, in Mishneh Torah... and it is our job to deliver the institutions of Jewish learning here and now that can guarantee this kind of education for our children.

We have to build these schools, we have to recruit, train, love and value the teachers, create the curriculum that deliver uncompromising excellence, we have to build the boards to govern, and create the resource network that will support all this and more. And it is time for us to stop being so polite about our agenda. As the community of Prague lies decimated and withered, as the Jews of Europe East and West, the Jews of Argentina, the Jews of Israel, even the Jews of America face the threat of modern day Hamans--now with real urgency, Jewish funders need to hear the message--the symphony is a good thing, the hospital is a fine thing, but Jewish funders need to fund Jewish day schools first and completely. Among the 1800 families--yours and mine--that constitute the small universe of major donors to Jewish day schools, there are no non-Jewish philanthropists. Nowhere on the Donor Assembly list is found a non Jewish name from the museum or symphony world, and yet community by community, Jews are choosing to fund worthy civic institutions before day schools, shuls, Jewish camps, teacher training programs, the whole range of programs that are the thin margin between our children and the genuine and pervasive threat that lurks near at hand--the darkness of the assimilation of our people, the loss of our Jewishness. Enough. It is time for us in the vanguard to understand the true challenge we face...before we stand by and see more Pragues built—museums that honor what was, rather than vibrant communities that reflect what is, and what must be....

This is the largest and most inclusive assembly in the day school world...such greatness, such power, such hopefulness here...We should celebrate each other, celebrate our commitment to our children and their children...and yet we must not be glib or self-satisfied. Today is Rosh Hodesh Adar...and our joy must increase but not without bounds. For we are the leaders of this generation, the builders...and the Work of building day schools is not done, not by a long stretch...

So build we must...

One more Rashi, this one from the last parshah of sefer Vayikra. This is the parsha in which the Torah depicts the tochacha--the curse that will befall the Jews, if they fail to live up the standards G-d outlines in the Torah. I want to focus not on the threat of the curse, but on the promise of the blessing which is available to the Jewish people, should they commit themselves to the challenge that G-d poses us. The parsha begins with a proposition from G-d to the people:

“If you will walk in My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will provide...” G-d promises blessings of prosperity and abundance and communal safety to the Jewish nation that rises to the challenge of its destiny. G-d promises:

“You will eat your bread to satiety...”

This promise of abundance is voiced in the plural--you refers to the entire community, everyone shall eat their bread, every family, every child....As we know that bread is often used Rabbinically as a metaphor for Torah...can't we read this promise in the Torah text to say that if we will fulfill our obligations as Jewish builders, build the ethos of day school learning, establish true excellence in Jewish education, then every family, every Jewish child, in communities large and small will be educated to their fill? This is a goal worth pursuing...

Tucked into the promised list of blessings that will accrete to the community that finds the passion and the resource and the leadership to rise up and be centered around learning and living Jewish values, Torah values is a promise of blessing that sends martial, and a little out of place, amidst the blessings of peace and prosperity...In the 9th perek, G-d promises:

**Five from among you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred from among you will pursue ten thousand;** and your enemies will fall before you by the sword. [26: 3-9]

Rashi sees a problem in this pasuk--a math problem. Obviously, in Troyes, where Rashi went to school, in the middle ages in France, there must have been a truly excellent day school, one that taught him not only Jewish text and the imperatives of his Jewish heritage, but also provided him with excellent learning models in secular studies--including math.

Rashi asks: Is this the (correct) calculation? Should it not have rather said, "and a 100 from among you will pursue two thousand?" Rashi sees that the math is wrong, but from the perspective of his day school education finds his own answer powerfully. Upon reflection, Rashi notes, "But, you cannot compare a few who perform the (dictates of) the Torah to many who perform (together the dictates of) the Torah..."

This is a huge insight. Rashi is teaching us that the power of righteousness does not scale up linearly. Rashi's insight is that when the Jews come together in sufficient numbers, the power of what they can achieve does not scale up linearly--rather, exponentially. If a community of disparate Jewish individuals can form a true assembly of common purpose, to build a society of Torah, tzedek and hesed, then the math can be truly stupendous. If 5 can effect 100, and 100 can effect 10,000, then what if 10,000 Jews across our nation could be committed to our agenda--the pursuit of true excellence in Jewish education? Then the good we have done would be exploded in the vision of G-d's promise to us from Behukotai--because the few committed, as we are, cannot be compared to the many committed, which is our opportunity and our challenge.

Conclude with a story, one I learned from Shimon Peres. I had the privilege to introduce him once awhile ago, when he was the keynote for BSR, an organization whose Board I sat on. Peres gave a terrific speech on the role of business in building a just society, and concluded his remarks with this story, which, he told the audience, had been taught to him by a black Moslem South African woman. I loved the story, but it is such a poignant thing to relate...there I was, listening to a Jewish statesman, a world leader, a Nobel Prize laureate no less, speaking with eloquence and power to an important audience of business leaders, and he attributed the story he told to a black Moslem South African woman. Now there are moving and magnificent stories that form that African oral tradition, stories that should be honored and examined and studied,

and by our kids, just like the students at the Gann Academy of the New Jewish High School in Boston study the literature of many peoples. But it broke my heart that Shimon did not know what I knew--that the story he attributed to the Moslem African woman in fact comes from the Babylonian Talmud, from Masekhet Berachot...excellence in Jewish education means that our children will learn to know such things, learn to revel in the richness and wonder of sacred Jewish texts, learn to live their living based on who we are as a people...

Anyway, the way Peres told the story in a way I'll paraphrase like this...

There was a small group gathered to learn from an elderly rabbi. The group sat together, and pondered. And they rabbi this day had a question for his students. In his voice, tired but wise, he asked simply "how do we know when the night is over and the day has begun?" Gently prodded, the first student suggested "rabbi, we know the night is over and the day has begun when we can distinguish a goat from a sheep." This did not suffice, so another suggested "we know the night is over and the day has begun when one can distinguish a fig from a date." Still not satisfied, a third suggested the definition in terms of being able to distinguish blue from green by the faint light of day. While all these answers were thoughtful ones, they were not the answer the rabbi sought, so he spoke up...

Friends, he suggested, the night will be over and the day begun when a small group of Jewish leaders in this day and age recognize that it is up to educate our children as Jews. When 13 partners, and 1800 donor families see that for all the good we've done, good enough simply isn't. That there are still Jewish children, way too many, growing up in the darkness of not knowing Jewish text, Jewish values, Jewish knowledge. Their night will stretch on, until we bring the day, until we band together to build the institutions, to people them, to perfect them. The night will be over and the day begun again when we understand G-d's challenge--we must set aside the time, the money, the human resources to build excellence in Jewish education. And we need to see Rashi's insight clearly--if 5 can overcome 100, but 100 can overcome 10,000 challenges, then the challenge for us is clear--that the night will be over, and the day begun, when we build our own community, a national community of committed advocates for day school education. Look how much we have accomplished; see with the clarity of mid-day how much further we have to go. The night is not over, but in this generation, with our resources, with institutions like PEJE, we can be the generation that provides light for our children.

May it be our will, with G-d's help, may it be our resolve...to see the night ended and the day begun for every Jewish child, in these days...bimha'rah byameanu...