

This week's Parsha starts with the commandment to rest on the Sabbath and is then followed by a tedious repetition of the inventory of all the equipment used in building and decorating the Tabernacle, the place where the Israelites would worship during their time in the wilderness. Having never before given a D'var Torah, I did what we do in these modern times, I googled it. The first entry I found, on the website reformjudaism.org really resonated so that is where I will focus my comments. The author, Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus' discussed and questioned the need for such a thorough and complete inventory. As a branch manager of a local credit union, where on a daily basis I assist people with carefully keeping track of their finances, her conclusion that careful accounting keeps us honest and also illustrates our values is one in which I can relate and speak on.

Careful and transparent accounting keeps us honest. Absolutely. What we write down, tends to get done, what we track tends to get our focus and attention. Our government and public officials could stand to take a lesson out of this Parsha and be more transparent in their record keeping as a means to earn and increase our trust of their governance.

From the Parsha:

“Some Israelites knew that they would have taken advantage of handling all that gold and silver for their own enrichment. They suspected Moses of being no better than they were.”

Further Rabbinic commentaries in the Midrash emphasize that leaders of the community must be held to a higher standard and remain above any suspicion of profiting personally from community resources for which they oversee.

Nothing really has changed. The rule makers, those in power, can easily manipulate the system or can be perceived to manipulate the system for their own gain. Not only does a thorough inventory keep us honest, it can also let us know if the use of our resources is indeed going to those things that we value and define as important.

There is an organization called the National Priorities Project (NPP) whose offices are housed right here in Northampton. NPP is a national non-profit, non-partisan research organization dedicated to making the complex and confusing federal budget transparent and accessible so we the people can see and understand how our tax dollars are generated and used. By thoroughly taking apart and understanding the breakdown of the budget, NPP not only helps us all to understand how money is being spent; ultimately we can see and analyze how this spending reflects the priorities of our country. We can then use this information to prioritize and influence spending decisions, assisting our leaders in putting our money where their/our mouth is, not just talking the talk, but actually walking the walk of our democracy.

NPP are the folks who brought us the electronic money counter that was in Broadside Books' window, tracking how much of our local dollars were going towards the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations. They have also written a book called A People's Guide to The Federal Budget which is a great tool to understand the budgeting process. I printed out some handouts from their website which show aspects of how the federal budget is broken down.

Diagram A shows President Obama's proposed total spending for Fiscal Year 2017. Diagram B illustrates the proportions of the 3 main spending categories, Mandatory Spending, Discretionary Spending and Interest on Federal Loans.

Mandatory spending (Diagram C) is determined by the eligibility or 'payment rules' of certain programs. Congress writes authorizing legislations stating that certain people are eligible for benefits from federal programs - such as food stamps and thereafter food stamps are awarded to anyone who meets the stated eligibility criteria. Each year in the budget process Congress cannot decide to increase or decrease the budget for food stamps; instead it periodically reviews the eligibility rules for the program and may change them in order to exclude or include more people. You can see in Diagram C that Social Security, Unemployment & Labor get the largest portion of Mandatory spending.

Discretionary spending (Diagram D) is the portion of the budget that goes through an annual appropriations process. This means that members of Congress can choose to increase or decrease the spending on any of these programs in a given year. While it does not represent the largest share of the federal spending, it does receive the most scrutiny from individuals, the media and lobbyists who want to influence federal spending. You can see that the Military gets the largest percentage of Discretionary spending.

Based on these diagrams, where you would say that our country's priorities are? Does that fall in line with how this country's vision is presented by our elected officials? Does that fall in line with our vision of what we want for our country?

I think it is important to think in the bigger terms of our role in making this society be one that espouses the concept of Tikkun Olam, repair of the world. I also understand that discouragement can easily set in when we are looking out at something that might seem so much larger than ourselves. We might say, wow, look at these numbers but really what can I do?

Perhaps the way in is to take an inventory of our own lives first, then our local community and so forth and so on. There are in fact times throughout our year where our tradition calls on us

to practice Teshuvah (reflection turning over), most notably of course during the High Holidays. We spend the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur first reflecting, taking an inventory on our past year and then we turn over and seek forgiveness for all the instances where our behavior and actions didn't live up to the goodness inside each one of us. And again here in the season of our liberation where we reflect on our collective story of enslavement to freedom, this concept of detailed inventory taking and accounting is shared.

Again as a Credit Union Branch Manager, the concept of careful accounting, record keeping and exploring inventory is something which I am greatly familiar. On a daily basis, I take an inventory of people's finances to help them understand what is going on in their accounts and also to help them improve their finances. It can be eye opening to see your spending habits laid out on paper, for you, to see the truth of your actions in the numbers on the page.

So I encourage us all to take our own inventories, ask ourselves to list those things that are most important in our lives. And then to look and see if the ways in which we spend our time and resources really match up with our so-called priorities. If we find that in fact the way we spend our time and money don't match our values, gentleness with ourselves and further reflection is needed to really understand what we truly have the power to change.

For instance, last week I dropped my son off at school on Thursday. As I was leaving I reminded him that Thursday is a day in which I work later. His response was "not fair, bad capitalism." He got in that moment that my working late was a have to, not a get to. Also often you don't see me here with Gave and Rachel on Shabbat because even though this is where I want to be I have to work. Gave sadly understands that in our current situation, even though my priority is to spend the vast majority of my time with my family, in order to pay the bills I have to work, sometimes even on Shabbat. And in a capitalist society where the value is on profit and things versus people, it is quite possible that the way I need to spend my time and resource won't match up to how I want to spend my time and resource. I imagine this is true not just for me but for many of us. And all we can do is keep reflecting, understanding and coming together in community to work collectively to create and be the change that we want to see for our society.

Shabbat Shalom.