

Parashat Vayigash 5777 Jerusalem

Jonathan Goldstein thought he found the perfect company to purchase. Schulmerich is a company located on a grassy hill in rural Pennsylvania. It makes church bells. Not the big ones that go into steeples: Hand bells that school and church choirs use. Interesting company for a nice Jewish boy.

Schulmerich has a competitor in the bell business: Malmark (which happens to be right up the block from Schulmerich). How did it happen that these two companies that make the same exact product happen to be right next to each other?

That's an interesting story, and if you want to hear the whole thing, including beautiful samples of the music that these bells make, use your computer, go to Planet Money, and search under "Bell Wars."

I am just going to give you a quick summary: Originally there was just Schulmerich, whose chief engineer and product designer was a man named Jake Malta. In the 1960s there was change in management at Schulmerich and a disagreement and Jake Malta went off and formed his own company: Malmark.

The only physical difference between the bells has something to do with the handles. Thus began a war between Schulmerich and Malmark over whose bell was better, louder, easier to play, and so forth. Lawyers got involved and millions of dollars were spent. People from one company didn't speak to people from the other company, and a similar feud developed between bell users. Some people swore by one, others swore by the other.

The fight went on and on... and eventually a lawsuit went all the way to the Supreme Court, which in its infinite wisdom decided that they had better things to do than to try to figure out who made a louder choir bell.

I listened to this podcast on the way home from the Jerusalem Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This exhibit, which is closing on Sunday, giving you just two days to go, examines the Jewish, Christian and Moslem connections to Jerusalem during the Medieval Period (1000-1400).

There are 200 artifacts, including photos, illuminated manuscripts — Bibles, prayer books, and letters. There are crusader swords, lamps that decorated mosques, and reliquaries, which Christian pilgrims used to bring back "relics" from Jerusalem to Europe.

As I listened to the podcast, I couldn't help but think about how Jerusalem, which is supposed to be a city of peace and the home to three great religions, has been a place that has been fought over for centuries. Like the bells which make beautiful music and

have been bitterly fought over for 50 years, Jerusalem, in all its beauty and diversity, has often been a place of strife and not a place of peace.

So, there I was looking at a hand signed letter by Moses Maimonides and two Jewish women struck up a conversation. "What, Rabbi, do you think of the exhibit?" they whispered. "Don't you think that they are deliberately downplaying our connection to Jerusalem... it's mostly Christian and Moslem."

Here she was standing in front of a letter personally signed by Moses Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish philosopher, Talmudist and communal leader who ever lived, and who spent a year in the Holy Land before ultimately settling in Fostat, Egypt. In the letter, Maimonides was asking for money to help rescue Jewish hostages. In the next case, was a hand drawn map by Maimonides on which he drew the complete design of the Second Temple. Scholars believe that he actually ascended to the top of the mount, where the Dome of the Rock is, to pray in the destroyed Temple. He was in Jerusalem sometime between October 16 and 19, 1165. From there he went to the tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. You see, religious tourism to Israel did not begin in our time. It is an age-old tradition.

There were these Jewish items, and there were illuminated prayer books, Jewish Bibles, Jewish wedding rings, and so forth.

But, to these two women, "our bells" should ring louder than everyone else's bells, and everyone, including the organizers of the Met Jerusalem exhibit ought to acknowledge that. The competition still rages: it's ours, not "theirs."

The battle over Jerusalem still rages: in the UN, in American politics, at the Western Wall. Israel has, until now, a great record of preserving equal access of all groups to the holy sites. Christians and Moslems control their own churches and mosques and there is freedom of worship.

Yet, the government in Israel, which is a narrow coalition that includes right wing settler groups and ultra-orthodox Jews have been taking troubling steps toward saying that it belongs to us, the whole thing. It's not just Jerusalem, it is the entire State of Israel, which the settlers believe belong to us. That is what a one state solution is all about. And this will threaten the democratic nature of the State of Israel.

That is not the only troubling thing. Right now, there is a law before the Knesset, to outlaw the wearing of Tallesim by women and prevent men and women from praying together at designated prayer sections.

In the UN, the US did not use its veto over a one sided anti-Israel resolution, reversing decades of protecting Israel at the UN. This last gasp, shot across the bow by the

outgoing Obama administration, will only embolden and entrench the right-wing elements in Israel, the US, and among the Palestinians.

The most beautiful painting at the exhibit was the one that is on the cover of the catalogue: it shows a scene from Jerusalem that the medieval painter made in which there are all kinds of people: young, old, black, white, turbaned, in robes, bearded, not bearded. It is the diversity of Jerusalem is part of what makes it a holy place. (The letters of Maimonides are on page 96 in the book.)

Jerusalem has the world Shalom in it. We need to keep working towards that vision of a city filled with all different people, men, women, children, Christians, Jews, Moslems, reform, orthodox, and just tourists, living together, in peace.

By the way, the bell war between Schulmerich and Malmark ended. Jonathan Goldstein, found himself at a meeting with the management of Malmark. He went right up to them and said: "Hi, I'm Jonathan Goldstein. I just bought Schulmerich. I understand that these two companies have been going at it for a number of years. It seems to me that you are not my enemy and I'm not your enemy. The enemy is the 300 million people who don't ring bells. Let's go show them what a great instrument this is."

And that was it. The war was over.