



**WUPJ CONNECTION 2015 Conference Associaçao Religiosa Israelita (ARI)
Congregation Rio de Janeiro, Brazil May 16, 2015 - Shabbat *B'har/B'chukotai*
Rabbi Daniel Freeland, WUPJ President's Sermon**

I opened the shades in my hotel room this morning and found myself staring at the remarkable natural mountains that surround Rio. They have power and beauty that neither the beautiful shore line or creative architecture can rival.

Most of the instructions and rules in *Vayikra* are revealed in the Tent of Meeting, but this week's *parashah* is delivered "*b'har Sinai*," on the Mountain of Sinai. The same place the *Aseret HaDibrot* were revealed.

Somehow, words *b'har*, from the mountain, resonate deeply within us. And I am grateful that we are gathering *b'har* – in this beautiful city of mountains. Our host community's messages of hospitality, warmth, and camaraderie are only amplified by the majesty of the mountains. And, a special thanks to the entire ARI congregation for welcoming us into your homes for Shabbat dinner and into this *kehilla kedosha*.

When I was interviewed for the *Globo* newspaper here in Rio, the interviewer asked me to describe Progressive Jewish prayer. I told her that she would be well advised to attend the two Shabbat services at ARI this weekend. They could not have been more different, and both were exceptional examples of the best of Reform/Progressive worship. Both reflected the confluence of Jewish tradition, inclusivity, and local culture. And while it was difficult for the reporter to understand that such two wildly diverse styles could be characterized as exemplars of Reform/Progressive Judaism, the delegates to this convention understand that it is precisely this diversity that exemplifies our strength.

And who am I? A sentimental, aging baby boomer. A frustrated musician. A Jewish dreamer. A child of the vision of Reform Judaism, and a true believer in the importance of our work.

I am grateful for the opportunity of serving this World Union of congregations. I look forward to imparting a sense of connectedness and responsibility to *Klal Yisrael* – a significant challenge in many of our largest Jewish communities.

In my ongoing struggle to control my weight, I meet regularly with a trainer at a local gym. Several months ago, he handed me two 40-pound weights (approx. 20 kilos) to lift, one in each hand. I struggled and could not accomplish the task.

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Then he connected the two weights with a 10-pound bar. Magically, I was able to lift the entire barbell. But I needed the bar to hold the weights together. When disconnected, I could not lift them.

I see the Jewish world in a similar way: two large Jewish communities anchor the Jewish population today -- 6.5 million in North America, and 6.5 million in Israel.

Both are connected by two million Jews who live spread over 50 other countries. This picture of *Klal Yisrael* is radically changed from the portrait of 60 or 100 years ago. Either one of the large communities can become (and often is) an isolated Jewish world unto itself. But without the bar of *Klal Yisrael* that holds us together, we would forget that there are not two Jewish realities, but dozens of Jewish realities.

Without the bar that connects the large weights, I could not lift them up.

The bar binds our communities together, and magnifies the force needed to lift up the entire system. And we are all impacted by events in other parts of the Jewish eco-system: Think about last summer's Gaza war, or the Hyper Kasher attack in January. Turmoil in any one part of the system pushes the entire system off balance.

In *parashat B'har*, God reminds Moses that the land is not our personal property – we hold it as a sacred trust. We are reminded that like human beings, the capacity of the land is not unlimited. It needs a natural cycle of productivity, rest, relinquishment, and then productivity again.

These regulations parallel God's wish that we rest once every seven days for without rest, we will slowly exhaust our capacity to produce. Shabbat requires us to relinquish control over time, just as the sabbatical year requires us to relinquish control over slaves, debts, and the land itself.

Our WUPJ family has been toiling and producing for well near 90 years, and we have witnessed more than one cycle of change. It is time for us to take a breath, and use this conference as a sabbatical from our daily work. Like Shabbat, this CONNECTIONS conference has offered us the opportunity to see the Jewish world – and its possibilities – anew.



Each new beginning requires adapting to new realities. If we continue to always do things the same way, our impact will slowly diminish. But change requires the careful release of patterns and practices that have developed in earlier cycles. Think about how our worship styles, our policies, our dress codes, our musical styles, have changed over the past decades. And while our principles remain timeless, our programs and structures needed to be regularly re-focused lest they atrophy and lose their effectiveness.

Our *parashah* reminds us: *ukratem dror ba'aretz l'chol yoshveha*. Proclaim freedom/release in the lands – to all who dwell there.

Today I would like to explore two kinds of freedom:

- The freedom to choose *how* we live our Jewish lives; and
- The freedom to choose *where* we live as Jews.

In too many places, still today in 2015, Progressive Jews are denied their rightful role in the larger Jewish community. In Poland and Hungary, we are fighting for recognition from both the official bodies of the Jewish community and the state government. In Israel, we worry about how this new ruling coalition might roll back much of the progress made on religious rights in the past few years. We resent being represented in public by Orthodox chief rabbis and *gemeines* and consistories. We want our rightful place at the table.

And within our own Progressive and Reform communities, we are too slow to implement our vision of egalitarianism, ritual experimentation, and full integration of interfaith families. Those of us here today are charged with leading our communities, not just with perpetuating their existence. Our magic potion for dynamic growth is the implementation of our stated values, especially when those values do not seem to be supported by decades-old congregational traditions. But in this sabbatical year, it is time to proclaim freedom – to allow our congregations to grow and evolve in new ways.

The leadership required to implement change is both lay and professional. As I travel, no one factor differentiates more the dynamic congregations from the anemic ones than the quality of that community's rabbinic leadership. The recruitment, education, and support of rabbinic leadership needs to be a primary responsibility of the WUPJ – and it will be.

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Only six Russian-speaking rabbis serve our entire FSU population. We need so many more, and some are approaching retirement age. To address this challenge, we are pleased to announce the opening of our new Machon Rabbinic Training Institute in Moscow this coming September. Growing out of the WUPJ program that has trained lay para-professionals for Russian-speaking communities, this new program will award a BA in Jewish studies from the Moscow State University, and the best students will be invited to continue their rabbinic training at Geiger College in Potsdam. Think about it: the Russian government university offering – and supporting – a degree in Jewish studies to train Jewish leaders, and the German government funding the training and ordination of rabbis for Europe. It's enough to make your brain explode.

We hope this initiative will allow us – in about six years – to begin ordaining up to three or four Russian-speaking rabbis each and every year, and thus grow the professional leadership of all our congregations in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

Three significant Latin American Progressive congregations have sought new rabbis this year. Because of the lack of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Reform rabbinic graduates, several of those congregations are considering engaging Masorti rabbis to lead them. But the Masorti movement requires dropping affiliation with the WUPJ in order to interview or hire a Masorti rabbi. This is blackmail!

So I am pleased to have been part of conversations this week with the Latin American WUPJ leadership and HUC-JIR President Aaron Panken to discuss the formation of a pre-rabbinic leadership *Mechina* program in Sao Paolo and Buenos Aires. Hopefully, these programs will launch in 2016, and two years later, several home-grown students will enter rabbinic study programs, and then return to serve our growing Latin American community.

A similar challenge exists in France, with some congregations limping along until they can find a French-speaking rabbi. Other Progressive congregations have even hired Modern Orthodox rabbis because of this shortage.

This is a systemic WUPJ challenge: We can only be as good as our rabbinic leadership. Building a new rabbi takes years: First we must recruit and convince our best young people to consider a rabbinic career. Then we must mentor and support them through their rabbinic studies, keeping them engaged with WUPJ congregations. And then we must create and implement a robust rabbinic placement system to serve international congregations, work and advise congregational search committees, work with the seminary students to educate them on employment

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opportunities, help match them with the right positions, and finally, conduct an international inventory of rabbis and rabbinic students and their language skills to assist congregations in their searches.

This endeavor will require new investment from the WUPJ and its regions, but without this focus, we deny ourselves the most crucial element in ensuring congregational growth and success.

Finally, I want to make some comments about anti-Semitism. Events in France this past January shocked us, and led to newspaper and magazine articles with titles like: “The End of European Jewry” and “Is There a Future for French Jewry?” Worse, at the height of the emotional shock, the prime minister of Israel had the temerity to say that Europe’s Jews should pack up and move to the safety of Israel. I must suggest that neither perspective is particularly helpful.

In April I led a delegation of North American WUPJ and CCAR leaders to Belgium and France. We met with all the congregational leaders in Brussels and Paris, and learned of the dynamic synagogues and Jewish life in both communities. True, the reality on the ground has changed: Muslims outnumber Jews ten to one. Equally true, the government understands that anti-Semitic violence is just the tip of the iceberg. This violence is a threat to a democratic, pluralistic France. Therefore, French military troops with sub-machine guns graced the doors of every synagogue and Jewish institution we visited.

But on *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, we participated in a special service at MJLF, one of the two large Progressive synagogues in Paris. The sanctuary was packed with young and old. On one wall was a large French flag. On the facing wall, an Israeli flag. And we sat in the middle. Our group was invited to ascend the *bimah* at the end of the service to lead the congregation in the singing of “*HaTikvah*.” Tears of Jewish unity flooded our eyes. Like our hosts, we understood that we love two flags – that we comfortably and consciously live in two worlds simultaneously.

The real question therefore should not be: “Will there be a future,” but rather “What kind of future will French Jews have?” and “How can we help them build that future?”

We are committed to building a strong Progressive Jewish future – in France, in Israel, in North America and South America, in Asia and Australia, in Poland and Ukraine – in every part of this globe where Jews may choose to live. History teaches us that economics and war and changing social conditions often lead to Jewish

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migrations from one part of the world to another. But the Jewish diaspora is not our weakness, it is precisely our strength.

This Shabbat we complete the reading of *Vayikra* with a double portion, *B'har* and *B'chukotai*.

As we complete reading each book of the Torah, we rise and recite together: "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek.*" We have been strong, we are strong, and we strengthen one another. As we move on to the next chapter in the life of our World Union for Progressive Judaism, I ask you to join me in reciting that life affirming refrain: "*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek.*"

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