

# The UAE's Dystopian Utopia: What? Me Worry? - Vayakhel-Pekudei 5783

You know those car commercials for Land Cruisers flying over sand dunes, dirt flying everywhere?

Well, we were in that car commercial.

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After our Emunah trip to Israel, a smaller group of us visited the UAE, United Arab Emirates.

So what was it like?

It was like the desert dunes drive.

It was wild.

In Dubai, the buildings are taller than anywhere else on earth as the Burj Khalifa (over a half a mile tall) towers over the planet, making the Tower of Babel look like a strip mall.



The buildings are all lit up like in Las Vegas.

There are man-made islands built in the shape of a Palm Tree; there is a building called the frame which looks like a massive picture frame with a thin 100-meter top piece.



An engineering marvel.

Why do they build all this?

Because they can.

They seem to have unlimited wealth based on oil and only one million Emirati citizens to care for. But there are approximately 8 million foreign workers who do most of the work.

And foreign workers cannot become citizens.

Citizens get free education, free health care, and when they get married, they get a free house!

But the foreign workers get nothing.

There is no voting, no free speech, and no dissent. If you do say something negative, you are "invited" to leave.

The streets are pristine.

A dystopian utopia.

The UAE is a dictatorship, a mostly benevolent dictatorship -- one that preaches and practices tolerance and openness.

The government has even built a synagogue!

Not a common occurrence in a Muslim country.

I wore my kippah without fear, and we heard Hebrew everywhere as numerous Israeli tourists have made this their Middle East destination of choice - of course, they don't have many options.



And we enjoyed the many kosher restaurants - putting our Boston offerings to shame.

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But I could not avoid the fact that all this could end in a moment. Dictatorships can slip from benevolent to dangerous - as we see across the globe -- not that democracies are perfect either.

But one change of government and the whole structure can come tumbling down.

Think of the beginning of the book of Exodus: "*Vayakam melekh hadash al Mitzrayim asher lo yada et-Yosef*" -- A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph (Ex. 1:7)

A change in leadership can signal bad news for minorities, as we Jews have known for millennia.

Originally from Pakistan, our jeep driver told us that his simple apartment block was an hour outside Dubai.

One waiter told me everything was much better in UAE than in his native India, but when I probed deeper, he didn't answer. I realized it could be dangerous for him to answer honestly.

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And so, as we literally flew over the dunes like a roller coaster off the tracks, my mind wandered to the morality of this country.

How can I make sense of all this beauty, the UAE's emphasis on tolerance and its open invitation to Jews with its complex relationship with its foreign workers and its lack of free speech?

Was it OK simply to take a break from my moral questions and enjoy?



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Our Torah reading this morning describes how the Israelites give generously to building the *Mishkan*, the portable desert sanctuary:

“*V’heim heivee’u eilav od n’davah ba’boker bab’boker* - the people kept bringing freewill gifts every morning. (Ex.36:3)

The *hakhmamim* - the artisans or, more literally, Moshe’s wise advisors have to tell Moshe “*marbim ha’am l’havee meeday ha’avodah* - the people are bringing more than is needed for the work [of the Mishkan].” (36:5)



Moshe has to tell the people to stop: “*al ya’asu od melakhah l’trumat hakodesh* - loose translation: stop!”

Closing this episode, the Torah states: “*V’hamelakhah haytah dayam lekhol hamelakhah la’asot otah v’hoteir* - [the people’s] efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done.” (Ex 36:3-7)

It’s kind of a fundraiser’s dream – of course, today, we would just take the excess donations and put them into an endowment!

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Two things jump out at me.

What does the word *melakhah* mean?

It means work.

The people are not just making donations; they are working, and they are volunteering themselves; their generosity becomes the hallmark of their behavior.

Interestingly, the *Aderet Eliyahu*, Rabbi Yosef Hayim, a 19th-century commentator, explains that this *melakhah* can be spiritual work - the Israelites are expending spiritual/emotional energy on this project, such was their desire to help.

But then the Torah utilizes the word: *dayam*. The work was “enough.”

Was it enough for “*d*for the building of the *Mishkan* - or for themselves?”

The Sefat Emet, the great 19th-century commentator, offers an explanation. He cites *Midrash Tanhuma* about how the Creation of the Universe and the building of the *Mishkan* parallel each other.

Just as in Creation, God calls out “*dye*,” *zeh maspik* (it’s enough) to prevent heaven and earth from expanding endlessly, so Moshe says to the people: *dye* - it’s enough.

And it’s true for us as well.

We need breaks from our thinking, from worrying, from trying to fix everything.

Moments when we can stop and appreciate, stop and enjoy.

We should appreciate that *dayam* means it’s enough for us; we don’t need to keep going.

Just as we do on this day of Shabbat, we can stop and enjoy - leaving the worries and some of the work for another day.

That is not to say that we disengage from that work. But we strive to know when it is *dye* - it’s enough.

We need to let go and recharge our spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical batteries.

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Returning to the UAE desert, our cars stopped for a break. We got out and looked at the view of pristine, untouched sand.

The dunes rippled like gentle waves on a calm reddish-brown ocean. It was gorgeous; I let the finest, smoothest, tiniest grains of sand I had ever touched flow through my fingers.

This view continued into the horizon as the sun set, deepening the colors and its beauty.

My son Ari ran across the fresh sand.

I put aside all my concerns to take in the wonder.

And then I followed him. I ran across the dunes, joining him as the sun melted across the sky.

*Dye* - our work was done for the day.

It was enough.

We could stop and enjoy.