

“An election-year initiative”  
“A costly extravagance”  
“Could renew a military space race”

On Wednesday President Bush announced his plans for a bold space initiative ... to send people to the moon by 2015 and eventually to send human beings to Mars. It is easy (and even my immediate tendency) to see the President’s initiatives such as this one (and his immigration plans) with a critical, even cynical eye. It is difficult and perhaps naïve to imagine that these bold and popular efforts (especially one that benefits the economies of such important electoral states such as California, Florida and Texas) have no relationship to the budding political season that is quickly upon us. It is even more of an effort to grasp the idea of spending billions of dollars when the country’s debt exceeds billions and billions of dollars. It sounds like talking about buying a new boat – for family vacations – when both cars, the house and tuition are not paid off or looming in the near future. To quote the first President Bush ... “It just wouldn’t be prudent.”

Still ... my mind wanders back to the previous week, as I watched grown men and women jump for joy when their remote control car landed on Mars, MARS!! Fresh in my mind are the interviews with engineers and astrophysicists, normally stoic and intellectually bland in their affect, speak with childlike wonder at what they were seeing and learning as we saw pictures and received data from MARS!!

I sense that there is something to that wonder and that awe. I even want see beyond the political manipulations and irresponsible and short sighted handling of our nation’s finances, and understand the value of reaching for the lights of the stars ... even as we seem to be in danger of paying our electricity bills for the lights of our own planet.

As we seem to be becoming slaves to budget deficits and political concerns that seem out of touch with everyday life ... how appropriate that in this week’s Torah portion, Shemot, our ancestors begin their slavery in Egypt. Our portion shed some light, some perspective on the way of keeping our feet on the ground while we simultaneously reach for the lights of the stars.

No doubt that Moses himself is bogged down in the very tangible realities of slavery and of his own responsibility in responding to it. We know that he eventual gets the official call to rise above it, grasp a vision of life for Israel that transcends slavery and begin the difficult work to make it happen. We know he witnesses the bush that burns, yet is not consumed ... but what does he do to get to that point ... to the point where he encounters the divine and glimpses this seeming impossible vision of redemption.

The Torah tell us that, “... he came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb.” The medieval Italian commentator, Ovadiah Sforno, teaches that the Torah makes note that it was only Moses who approached ... to commune with himself and pray. Nehama Leibowitz, the 20<sup>th</sup> century Israeli commentator, explains that the Sforno “understands the text to imply that

Moses rejected the vanities of the world, fled their noise and tumult, did not seek the company of his fellow shepherds, did not try to root himself in his place of refuge, but kept to himself, avoiding human habitation.” This simple mention in text and understanding suggests that there is a connection between intimacy with the divine AND being able to separate from the everyday – no matter the nature of the everyday.

A similar separation occurs earlier in his life ... when Moses is floating down the Nile as an infant. Miriam had placed Moses in the basket and then, the Torah mentions, “... placed herself a distance away to know what would happen to him. (Exodus 2:4) The 18<sup>th</sup> century Polish rabbi, Levi Yitzchak, suggests to us that Miriam distancing of herself was more than stepping away, it was what she needed to do to understand his destiny. “... when beings of the worlds are attached to their material nature, then they are not able to grasp the true worship of the Creator, blessed be God. But, when they distance themselves and strip away their material nature, then they are able to grasp true communion with the Creator, blessed be God.” If Miriam stayed too close, too engulfed by her current condition and situation ... she would severely limit herself.

Let’s focus the light of these teachings about Moses and Miriam upon ourselves. As we reflect on the demands and needs of our everyday lives, it is easy to see the very real needs and realities we face ... as individuals we may have to support others financially, emotionally or both. We may have deadlines, projects or objectives that we have no choice but to meet, complete or realize. Our families may be facing the challenge of illness – physical or mental; loss or survival. Our nation faces poverty, outrageous financial debt and war. On any level these concerns demand our attention and resources each and every day ... and to ignore them, may be to succumb to them.

As human beings we need to sometime and someday distance ourselves from these very real and important matters. We need to do so, in order to keep our perspective, to continue to grow and not stagnate, to maintain our humanity by reaching for divinity. Miriam and Moses reached for it in the midst of their realities, and so must we. That divinity may take different forms for different people ... but in any circumstance must strive toward the ideas and actions that allow us to maintain our humanity.

Arizona Senator John S. McCain, USN, tells the following story:

As you may know, I spent five and one half years as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. In the early years of our imprisonment, the NVA kept us in solitary confinement or two or three to a cell. In 1971 the NVA moved us from these conditions of isolation into large rooms with as many as 30 to 40 men to a room. This was, as you can imagine, a wonderful change and was a direct result of the efforts of millions of Americans on behalf of a few hundred POWs 10,000 miles from home.

One of the men who moved into my room was a young man named Mike Christian.

Mike came from a small town near Selma, Alabama. He didn't wear a pair of shoes until he was 13 years old. At 17, he enlisted in the US Navy. He later earned a commission by going to Officer Training School. Then he became a Naval Flight Officer and was shot down and captured in 1967.

Mike had a keen and deep appreciation of the opportunities this country and our military provide for people who want to work and want to succeed. As part of the change in treatment, the Vietnamese allowed some prisoners to receive packages from home. In some of these packages were handkerchiefs, scarves and other items of clothing. Mike got himself a bamboo needle. Over a period of a couple of months, he created an American flag and sewed on the inside of his shirt. Every afternoon, before we had a bowl of soup, we would hang Mike's shirt on the wall of the cell and say the Pledge of Allegiance. I know the Pledge of Allegiance may not seem the most important part of our day now, but I can assure you that in that stark cell it was indeed the most important and meaningful event.

One day the Vietnamese searched our cell, as they did periodically, and discovered Mike's shirt with the flag sewn inside, and removed it. That evening they returned, opened the door of the cell, and for the benefit of all us, beat Mike Christian severely for the next couple of hours. Then, they opened the door of the cell and threw him in. We cleaned him up as well as we could.

The cell in which we lived had a concrete slab in the middle on which we slept. Four naked light bulbs hung in each corner of the room. As I said, we tried to clean up Mike as well as we could. After the excitement died down, I looked in the corner of the room, and sitting there beneath that dim light bulb with a piece of red cloth, another shirt and his bamboo needle, was my friend, Mike Christian. He was sitting there with his eyes almost shut from the beating he had received, making another American flag.

As human beings ... we must never forget to address, nurture and cultivate that part of us that is and can be beyond the everyday – whether that everyday is mundane or monstrous. That reach for divinity may be as simple as making a flag, creating a few moments of sacredness and solitude or even, reaching for the stars. So ... why it is open to debate whether the President's latest space initiative is merely political manipulation, within it is a hint of an idea very basic to who we are as human beings ... that in our efforts to maintain our humanity, we must always reach for divinity.