

8/14/20

Dear BIC Family,

We take it for granted that our synagogue is a modern-day extension of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Even before the Temple was built, there was always a place to go--a sacred shrine, the Tabernacle, or a local altar. When the Temple stood, the biggest draws were the pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. This week's Torah reading gives an instruction for those visits: "They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed, but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you" (Deuteronomy 16:16-17). Today, we like to think that when we bring ourselves and offer our resources to our synagogue, we are doing our best to fulfill that commandment. Further, we take pride in our diversity and welcome various perspectives, talents, and personalities, each person bringing their "own gift" to our vibrant kahal.

We are still showing up, and we are still bringing gifts, but Zoom and email are not the same as flocking to our beautiful building and filling a room with spirited song, or holding reflective space for one another, in person. Knowing that we are not the first to feel the tensions of displacement in the face of tragedy doesn't do much to help us navigate the space in which we find ourselves. However, our rich library offers up some gems to guide us. I have important information to share with you in this letter, and I want to introduce it by means of a brilliant, ancient legend from the Talmud (Brakhot 3a):

Rabbi Yosi said: One time I was walking on the path, and I entered a ruin from among the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Elijah of blessed memory came and watched the doorway until I finished my prayer...He said to me...: Whenever the Israelites go into the synagogues and schoolhouses and respond: "May His great name be blessed ("Y'hei Shmei Rabbah m'vorach"), God shakes his head and says: "Happy is the king who is thus praised in His house! Woe to the father who banished his children, and woe to the children who had to be banished from the table of their father!"

As you can see, Rabbi Yosi tries to get as close as possible to what he has always done. Since he can't offer a sacrifice, he prays; since he can't pray in the Temple, he prays in a ruin in Jerusalem. It is pious and also pathetic. God's response models, astoundingly, an approach from which I hope we can learn. God treasures the ongoing connection with humanity, but at the same time, God is saying, "Let's be real, here. Let's not ignore your fear and uncertainty. Let's put into words that these are not normal, or happy times--not for Me, and not for you."

As we usher in the month of Elul next week, setting the stage for our holiday season in a strange and unsettled time, let's follow the Torah's instruction and not appear empty-handed. Let's follow God's example in the legend and offer something real and honest, a sacred testimony about what we are experiencing. Elul is the month of introspection and soul-searching leading up to the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We will use this time of

reflection to produce what will be a finished work, a communal testimony of what we are experiencing and learning about ourselves as humans, as Jews or Jewish-adjacent people, as people of a particular “race”, as family members, as people involved in different kinds of work, as members of Beth Israel Center. Let’s do it!

We are going to write a Torah. It will be our expression of how we are moving through this time. On Simchat Torah, instead of physically distanced BIC members pretending to dance merrily with our Torah scrolls, masked and not singing, on your computer screen, we will do something more real. We will open the Aron (Ark). We will give honor to the sacred scrolls waiting for the time when it will be safe to dance with them again. Then, I will reach in and take out our very own scroll, the one we are going to write between now and Rosh Hashanah. I will hold it up and share writings and drawings from our Beth Israel Center family. Our Torah will be our offering this year, and it will be preserved as a lasting testimony of our kahal’s life in exile from our sanctuary.

We are experiencing an unprecedented time, and it is changing us. At least one submission from every member household will make this truly a Beth Israel Center Torah. That doesn’t necessarily mean this is a family writing project. Multiple submissions from one household are welcome, and one person may submit multiple pieces. Submissions can be personal narratives, stories that capture aspects of your life during this time, poetry, musical compositions, reflective paragraphs, and one-dimensional (i.e. flat) artistic works, such as paintings or drawings. What might feel mundane to you now may be exactly what resonates for people as we read and reflect upon this time. We value all voices!

What we’re learning about ourselves and our world is sacred and important. All submissions will be reproduced onto a scroll that will be attached to poles with handles, just like a Torah scroll, and covered with a mantle. Just like our Biblical texts, what we produce will be raw, real, and very human. Like our ancient Torah, we hope that ours will contain words that are loving, challenging, sweet, critical, hopeful, angry, grateful, sad, humorous, poetic, conflicted, and more. Just like our Biblical texts, this record of what we are living through will be a resource for us as we grow into what comes next and understand the impact the pandemic has had on us.

You can find more information about what to produce and how to submit it on the new, High Holy Days page on our website.

Are you in?

With love and blessings for a Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Betsy

August 21

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

As we head into Shabbat, I'd like to connect us with parts of this week's *haftarah*, in which the prophet Isaiah exhorts the Babylonian exiles to return to Jerusalem. One might have thought that the exiles would be eager to return home, but in fact, most chose not to return to the Land of Israel, having become comfortable in Babylonia. God sees them as stupefied, lulled into complacency and flagging in commitment to their Israelite identities and particular ways of worship. There is no indication from Isaiah that God is ready to accept Torah study and synagogue-based religious practices as replacements for the hope of a rebuilt Temple. Through Isaiah, God invokes memories of the Destruction of Jerusalem and links their exile to the Hebrews' oppression in Egypt, in an attempt to inspire them to return home.

Isaiah urges his co-nationalists:

“הִתְעוֹרְרִי הִתְעוֹרְרִי” - *Hitor'ri, hitor'ri* - Rouse, rouse yourself! and “עוֹרִי עוֹרִי” - *Uri, Uri* - wake, wake up (Isaiah 51:17, 52:1)! Reading those urgent words now, at the start of Elul, helps us hear the call to confront our relationship with the Divine and our fidelity to the most important commitments of our lives.

In the *haftarah*, God provides a model of presence and readiness to re-engage: “I, the One Who promised, am now at hand” --“אֲנִי-הוּא הַמְדַבֵּר הַנִּנְי” (Isaiah 52:6). God is saying, “I am here for you. We have an tradition of reading the name of this month, “Elul,” as an acronym for “*Ani L'dodi v'dodi li*”--I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (Song of Songs 6:3), a loving invitation back into relationship with the Divine and our truest and best selves.

This Shabbat is a perfect time for us to incline our hearts, tenderly and lovingly, toward the quiet stirrings that remind us of who we are and how our world calls for our presence and commitment. As we sing “*Hitor'ri, hitor'ri ...Uri, Uri!*” (*Rouse, rouse yourselves! Wake, wake up!*) as part of “*L'cha Dodi*” this evening, let us open our hearts to the possibility of joyful awakening to the Divine Presence within and surrounding us--even, *especially*, at this most challenging time of pandemic.

This Shabbat, we will hold our first live streamed Shabbat service, at which we will celebrate Isaiah Loeb having become a bar mitzvah. Live stream is a one-way channel, offering you a better viewing experience than Zoom and allowing those of us leading the service to refrain from manipulating technology on Shabbat. You will have an opportunity to mingle and socialize after the service, via Zoom breakout sessions, which will be facilitated graciously by a friend of our kahal. As always, the Zoom session will be open before Shabbat begins, so you can be logged into it in advance and just toggle over to it following what we expect to be a joyful Shabbat service.

[Here is the link to the live-streamed service.]

[Here is the link to the Zoom “kiddush time” schmooze.]

Our gracious Zoom host, whose name is Holly, will begin hosting the schmooze session as soon as the service ends.

Because it is a bar mitzvah celebration and we are able to daven with a minyan on our property, this week’s service will include a Torah service. The reading will be abbreviated, as a precautionary health measure. We will read Deuteronomy 20:10 - 21:9 (at the end of *Parashat Shoftim*).

For your convenience, you can print out the Torah reading in advance or download it to your computer’s desktop [here.]

Shabbat shalom, and love,
Rabbi Betsy

P.S.

We have received our first submissions for our Torah (the one we are writing). There is much excitement! Please submit yours soon. All of the details can be found here: <http://www.bethisraelcenter.org/our-torah>.

August 28

Dear BIC Family,

The sands kept shifting as we marked our 23rd week of mostly virtual shul, while the pandemic encountered new opportunities to spread. Another unarmed, Black man was shot in Wisconsin by a white police officer, re-igniting protest, violence and destruction here in Madison, in Kenosha, and elsewhere. We strengthened our resolve to take action to dismantle racism and pressed forward in our planning to do this work. Our kahal also continued to support one another through shiva, and to celebrate happy milestones virtually. Meanwhile, our plans for High Holy Days and Talmud Torah continue to take shape in response to what we know.

Our *parashah*, *Ki Teitzei*, deals mostly with how to be good citizens and neighbors, underscoring the importance of vigilance and constancy in maintaining a caring and safe society. Reading this *parashah* during a week when we planned for our upcoming, live-streamed Shabbat service (next week) offers a perfect opportunity to invite you to help us guarantee the most effective communal davening experiences possible.

Your health needs are paramount. If helping to plan, joining online, and offering feedback are your best ways to engage, we will be thrilled to continue receiving those gifts.

We are also seeking people who are able, based on their personal and careful risk assessment, to help make a minyan of 10 Jewish adults in our sanctuary, for the online Shabbat morning services we intend to offer every few weeks, starting September 5. It will be a tremendous service to the kahal and a great mitzvah for those who are able and qualified to perform it. Having a *minyan* in the sanctuary allows us to recite *Kaddish*, sing the *Kedushah* together during the *Amidah*, and conduct a short Torah service with the rituals we were so delighted to welcome back into our routine last Shabbat. We will do our best to provide a joyful and spiritually enriching experience for those participating from home as well as the few in the room.

If you can help us make an in-person minyan for Shabbat morning services, please call or email the office to let us know as soon as possible. We are now collecting names for making Shabbat minyanim on September 5 and 26, October 3 (which is also Sukkot) and 10 (which is also Shemini Atzeret) and 24. In addition, we will be streaming and therefore hoping to make an in-person minyan on Simchat Torah -- Sunday morning, October 11. Please tell us which dates work for you.

The following health practices will be upheld in our building:

- A limit of 10 people plus staff can attend services
- Safe physical distances maintained at all times
- Masks worn by all participants, including prayer leaders and Torah readers, at all times
- One person (the leader) singing at a time; no congregational singing
- Total # of leaders/readers kept to a bare minimum
- Prayer books will not have been touched for at least a week
- No touching of the Torah or other accoutrements by participants
- Hand sanitizer readily available upon entry and in the sanctuary
- Bathroom access guided in keeping with our COVID-safe practices; no water bubblers
- Food will not be served.

Based on the success of these Shabbat morning services, we will determine how best to move forward beyond October. Guided by the ideals and principles that have kept BIC strong for generations, we aim to provide spiritual and emotional connection, and maximize communal engagement.

Now, let's get ready to welcome Shabbat. It is the respite that makes it possible for us to do the important work our society demands of us at this challenging moment, and always.

Shabbat shalom um'vorach, with love,
Rabbi Betsy

September 4

Dear BIC Family,

For the past 25 weeks, we have engaged in a constantly-in-motion journey of decision making about how best to hold our BIC family together with familiar ritual and the comfort of communal prayer, shared presence, and the fundamental importance and soulful benefits of Shabbat. Tomorrow morning we will arrive at the next station along our journey: streaming our Shabbat morning services using the newly installed live streaming equipment in our sanctuary.

- [Here is the live stream link] for tomorrow's Shabbat morning services. We will daven from 10:00 to 11:30.
- [Here is the Zoom link for the "Kiddush time" schmooze.] Be sure to thank Holly, our kind friend who is hosting the Zoom meeting so we can visit with each other on Shabbat.
- In addition to your siddur, you will want to have the Torah and Haftarah texts handy. You can access them here: [PDF]
- Don't forget that you need your own siddur.

Many of you are by now familiar with online services. Here are some pointers for tomorrow:

- As always, you can open both the live stream and Zoom sessions prior to Shabbat so as to avoid active use of your technology. For the service, look for the "Click to Enable Auto-Start" button in the upper right corner. You can click this any time, and the stream will start when services begin on Shabbat morning.
- Now that we have begun conducting a modified Torah service, services begin with "*Nishmat*." Those who wish to warm up with the usual preparatory liturgies should do so before 10:00.
- Participants in the service will not always stand where you would have expected to see them. Please bear with us as we experiment with logistics. The goal is to maintain health-conscious distances in the sanctuary while providing you with a quality audio-visual experience.
- There will be no chat features, consonant with our Shabbat practices.

In this week's *parashah*, *Ki Tavo*, our biblical ancestors learn more about what they are to do when they enter the Land, ostensibly meaning, when they cross the Jordan and settle in Canaan. However, Rabbi Akiva taught that observance of the mitzvot was a prerequisite for entering the land. His reading of the text provides critical grounding for all Jewish practice outside of Israel. Our way of life is not only designed for our particular, sovereign land. In fact, keeping the *mitzvot* may be especially important when we are outside of the place we cannot yet enter.

I can't help but see a connection to our own Jewish lives outside of our building. It is easy to feel like our Jewish practices don't matter when we do them by ourselves. But that is a serious missed opportunity. Our practices are what keep us connected to our tradition and remind us that we are not alone. Moreover, practices done with mindful intention open windows to our inner lives and to our souls. That is true all week, and especially on Shabbat, when we are more

receptive. May this Shabbat open all of the windows that can bring us a measure of solace at this fraught time--windows to livestream, Zoom, connection to community and heritage, and a glimpse of our most pure and loving selves.

Shabbat shalom um'vorakh--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing,
Rabbi Betsy