

11/13/20

Dear BIC Family,

As we head into Shabbat after 34 weeks of pandemic-related closure in varying degrees, our weekly Torah portion calls our attention to the passing of time. Stages and numbers mark lives described by their contours, the peaks and valleys of human existence. But most of our living happens in the spaces between those data points, doesn't it?

Sarah suffers irredeemable grief over Isaac's near proclide. Her husband, Abraham, whose feelings for his living wife never appear in lines of text, bewails her death, buries her honorably, and then finds comfort in a new marriage. It brings comfort to read these familiar stories and remember that our own realities extend beyond the boundaries of our own existence. We are connected to the souls of the living and the dead, to a deep, ancient tradition, and to the Eternal Unfolding of Being, inspiring us to seek one another's faces and feel joy when we see each other on screens.

Isaac develops spiritual practices to carry him from the trauma of his near-death on the altar, and his grief over his mother's death, to his becoming the first biblical character to fall in love, in this week's *parashah*. Rebecca, his bride, leaves her family to dwell in a new locale, where she will become one of the matriarchs of our people.

This past Monday, the pandemic pushed us to our most restrictive level of COVID-19 operations. For at least through November 22, we will have no in-person BIC operations. We are staying home to preserve life.

Despite the grim epidemiology, and in a week filled with emotions following the presidential election, we filled the week now waning with living. At BIC, we rode the winds of Lilah's joyful bat mitzvah last Shabbat into Betsy and Quinn ("Chezi") Buczakovskis' wedding in our BIC backyard on Sunday. Anna Heifetz led Shacharit services for the first time this week, beautifully. We observed several yahrzeits with heart-warming online minyanim. Our regular classes and meetings took place. Newcomers approached me to begin journeys toward joining the Jewish People. And, last night, with great energy, we began our work to combat racism in our first session with our Nehemiah partners.

I'll be Zooming with you from my home at this point, even on Shabbat. I look forward to a spirited Musaf and a good dose of schmooze with you tomorrow, as we experiment with a new version of Shabbat connection. This is also "*Shabbat m'varchim*," when we bless the new month of Kislev. We always seek light in the darkness, especially as we look toward Hanukkah toward the end of the month. We must make every effort to bring light into our hearts in so many ways at this time.

Shabbat comes in early, but not a moment too soon. We need it more than ever. May we seek and find opportunities to rest and rekindle the sparks that make our lives meaningful.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

11/20/30

Dear BIC Family,

Our 35th week of closure proved tough. As COVID-19 deaths surged past 250,000, we grieved the loss of our beloved Noah Hershowitz, z"l, confronted grimly our hopes for Thanksgiving and Hanukkah gatherings and more in the wake of tightened public safety policies, and waited out another disturbing post-election week.

In the face of so much difficulty, we have an opportunity to take refuge in the familiar narratives of our weekly Torah portion and to find ourselves anew in their timeless wisdom. This is "Jacob and Esau Week" (*Parashat Toldot*). God foretells the biblical twins' destinies. I am pondering how much a meta-narrative determines our own behavior at this time. Can we foster within ourselves dignity, grace, compassion, clarity, and resilience when we are so strained by loss and uncertainty? I believe we can, admittedly at some moments better than others. I believe that we really can raise up our better selves from the muck of our challenging circumstances.

In our *parashah*, although Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau differently, he wishes both sons the "dew of heaven" and the "fat of the earth." Both sons are blessed with the potential for Divine beneficence and bountiful harvests. The Sfat Emet helps us understand how we, too, can live in grace and do the work we are meant to do so that we can thrive. The key is to find Divine purpose in all things. Thus attuned, we can find the insight and awareness we need to make life-giving, practical decisions.

How do we do that? We would do well to explore helpful practices we may not typically use. I am making an extra effort to make time to breathe, pray, meditate, walk outside, sip tea slowly, savor a good meal, turn off texts and email. I am actively seeking to sprinkle small moments of gratitude into each day. Carving out space in my mind and time in my day for these practices is not easy for me, but I am better for it when I do. I find it helps a lot to slow down where we can, because pandemic time is different.

We need to rest our minds and our tempers, because the work of living through a pandemic with integrity is so difficult. The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, puts it like this: "When you touch one thing with deep awareness, you touch everything. The same is true of time. When you touch one moment with deep awareness, you touch all moments." Yes. Let's do that.

Shabbat gives us a taste of sweetness even in bitter times. Shabbat attunes us to the light that burns in every soul, connecting all of us to one another and to all that is. Our sacred inheritance

of Shabbat is the most brilliant technology I know for cultivating the depth of awareness that is so hard to find at times of distress. And we don't need to make time for it. It's right there waiting to embrace us.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

11/27/30

Dear BIC Family,

Do you remember your dreams? I lose most of mine upon waking, but some stick. Since I was young, I have been able to fix my dreams, that is, to rewind them while still asleep, and then to inhabit them differently, sometimes arriving at different outcomes. Dreams I have "fixed" often linger and sometimes repeat. Some say that the images which fill our dreams spring from our own minds and represent aspects of our own selves. Reflecting on our dreams that way can instruct us about how we are living our lives. I often find that to be true.

Some say that angels may appear in our dreams, in the form of people, animals, or other symbols, coming to guide us toward new paths, if we heed them. I have found that to be true, as well. This week's *parashah* features Jacob's famous dream of a ladder standing on earth, with its top reaching the heavens, and angels ascending and descending on it. Literally, in the Hebrew, the angels are moving "*in* it," not "*on* it." And, since Hebrew does not have a gender-neutral pronoun, "it" actually is "he." Thus, the angels ascend from earth and descend from heaven "*in* him." The plain sense of the text is that the angels ascend and descend the ladder, but some of our sages pick up on the possibility that the angels move within Jacob himself, one going so far as to suggest that Jacob's dream comes to teach him that he can cause the movement of angels through his own agency.

In our Torah, angels always instigate a pivot in a character's life course. Alone and afraid, in the middle of the night, between two places, Jacob discovers an internal place where eternity resides. No longer will outward circumstances determine his fate. Rather than being "nowhere," he has encountered heaven's gate. Thenceforth, strength and agency will emanate from his spiritual core. Eventually, he will even assert his purpose over an angel he wrestles.

This Shabbat following Thanksgiving, our pandemic-driven displacement and isolation feels especially acute. The loss is real--and so is the reality that what connects us to one another endures beyond locale. As a kahal, we will continue to find ways to seek our source together. Like Jacob, we will persevere, learning through travail and becoming stronger precisely through our vulnerability. Like our People throughout the generations, we will also welcome gratitude and acknowledge our blessings.

This Shabbat morning, we're trying *Davar Acher*, which means "something different." We'll gather on Zoom at 10:00, where I will lead 20 minutes of singing melodies from the siddur, and Josh Garoon will lead a 20-minute Torah study. We'll make Kiddush and feel the warmth of one another's smiles and Shabbat shalom wishes. You will not need your tallit. If you haven't already, please download Josh's source sheet in advance and bring it to the Zoom session, along with your siddur. We'll be eager to see you and hear your feedback after Shabbat.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

12/04/20

Dear BIC Family,

Do you believe in angels? Our tradition accepts their presence easily, yet we don't often talk about them. Perhaps that's because the angels in our tradition are hard to spot. Most of the time, they look and act like people. In the *Tanakh*, we often find that angels are mistaken for people, and the Hebrew word for angel, "*malakh*," often is used to refer to a human messenger.

This week's *parashah*, *Vayishlach*, includes Jacob's second angel encounter. Last week, he dreamt of angels ascending and descending. Now, he wrestles with one, who bestows upon him the new name "Israel," a name that designates him, and all of us, as God-wrestlers.

At least, that is what we often remember about Jacob's new name: he wrestles with an angel, so he's a God-wrestler. But actually, the angel tells him, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Gen. 32:28)." The parry seems to encapsulate Jacob's evolution as a person in relation to other people, and spiritually, as he takes his place as heir to the Covenant his grandfather, Abraham, made with God.

Even the most well-adjusted among us struggle with people and with God. Many of us bear the scars of those struggles, like Jacob, who walks with a limp following his nocturnal struggle. Fortunately, our struggles often propel us forward in a new light, transformed for the better, like Jacob. With the rising sun, the newly-named Israel goes off to meet his estranged brother. They embrace, and Jacob moves on to the next stage of his life with a new-found integrity: "Jacob arrived whole (*shalem*) to the city of Shechem in the land of Canaan" (Gen. 33:18).

Struggling can make us more whole, even though it is difficult. We usually do not feel our wholeness taking shape in the midst of a struggle. The biblical text hints abundantly at Jacob's difficulty in identifying the changes taking place in his own development. How lucky for him that an angel appears at a liminal moment to name Jacob's transformation! We, instead, must discern our own changes and paths.

But we are not alone. You and I may not be angels, but we stand in for them all the time. When we grasp the sacred of trust we place in one another by sharing our thoughts, feelings, and experiences with focus and sincerity, we may even be more precious than angels. Why? Because angels lack agency. We, on the other hand, possess the capacity to lift our faces toward one another with grace and intention. In our cooped-up state, finding reserves of sacred attention to bring our full presence to one another may try our endurance. But nothing we do could be more sacred.

Shabbat is the perfect time to unleash the holy sparks that fly when we bring ourselves to full and honest encounter with one another. I hope that we can do that for one another.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,

Rabbi Betsy

PS

Hanukkah begins this coming Thursday evening! Please join your BIC family on Zoom to light candles and enjoy 10-15 minutes of kid- and adult-friendly entertainment on Zoom, each evening at 6:30 (except Friday, when it will follow Kabbalat Shabbat). On the first night, we'll come back at 7:30 to share stories about the great and small miracles in our lives. I would love to hear about yours!