

12/11/20

Dear BIC Family,

Every year until now, when I placed my *hanukkiah* (Hanukkah menorah) in my front window, performing the *mitzvah* of *Pirsumei Nissah* -- proclaiming the miracle of Jewish survival -- I felt more like I was revealing something private to the world. Although people outside could not see into my home, I was showing that I was a Jew celebrating Jewish distinctiveness and rededicating myself living out my Jewish heritage. I was inviting others to wonder about my vision for living out my life and what story I was telling by kindling those lights and placing them there.

We write and tell our stories through the practices we cultivate and share. Lighting Hanukkah candles is a practice that evokes a great deal of Jewish history, legend, and rules. Early on, the rabbis endeavored to establish the essence of the practice: is it the kindling of the flame, or the placing of the candelabra in a place where it can be seen by others? As much as “proclaiming the miracle” through public display of the lit *hanukkiah* (*Pirsumei Nissah*) matters, they knew -- as we know -- that something transformative happens when we bring light into the world. The spark, itself, opens a spiritual channel.

The profound answer is that we light the flames in the place they are meant to be -- *Hadlakah b'makom hanakha* -- checking both boxes, with focused intention. We awaken our spiritual capacity where we can share it with anyone and everyone who may happen to come along and be touched by it.

This Hanukkah, we lack the usual separations between our private and public spaces. In and out of each other's homes via screens, with faces large and close, sharing online across miles instead of with just the people nearest to us, placing a *hanukkiah* in a public-facing window feels less revelatory. But at this season of rededication, it is as important as ever that we tell our stories and make public who we are. And our practice should be significant, not perfunctory.

Perhaps, then, this is a Hanukkah to think differently about the light we want to release into the universe. While our lighting and blessing may recall themes from our old playbook, might we also give expression to new hopes, just emerging from these disorienting times? Should we proclaim our message from the windows of our homes, in our Zoom screens, or will we attempt to illuminate places in our own hearts where we did not look closely in years past?

This Shabbat Hanukkah is a great time for us to ask what we need to wonder about in order to truly rededicate our lives. May we nurture the sparks that help us see where our light needs to shine.

Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and enlightenment.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

12/18/20

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

I hope that you were able to share the light of Hanukkah from the windows of your homes and/or Zoom screens this past week, our 40th since we closed our building to do our part to preserve life. Our building may be closed, but our congregational life is vibrant. For eight nights, we gathered together online to light *hanukkiot* and share in delightful entertainment by and for our BIC family. A hearty yasher koach goes out to all who participated, and to Deb, for putting it all together.

We have come a long way and grown closer in many ways as a *kahal*. The dedication of Our Torah last Sunday gave evidence of our strong desire to make our way through this time as a *kahal* and to grow from what we learn. We will continue to strive to find more ways to connect with each other in the months ahead. With communal Shabbat gatherings taking place each Friday evening, Shabbat morning, and *matza'ei Shabbat* (for *Havdallah*) and a full roster of classes and learning opportunities for all ages underway, we are enjoying much Torah in and out of each week.

Our task between now and the time when we are able to resume gathering in large numbers is to stay the course with mask wearing and practicing the safest and most reasonable measures to keep ourselves and others safe from the spread of the virus. Only our vigilance in the months ahead will support the downtrend in new cases and bring us to the joyful day when our voices will ring out in song and prayer from our sanctuary and we will enjoy the Best. Kiddush. Ever. We are fortunate to have developed so many sustaining ways to be together until then.

This Shabbat, we bring you "*Davar Acher*," the "something else" we piloted last month. Jon Pollack will bring us a lively Torah study following the singing of Shabbat melodies

that I will lead. We will continue to build a repertoire of new melodies and enjoy old favorites. Please bring your siddur to follow along. The entire program will occupy about 45 minutes, and I look forward to seeing you on screen.

Shabbat Shalom Um'vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

01/01/21

Dear BIC Family,

This week, we complete our reading of the Book of Genesis, culminating in Parashat Vayechi. Jacob dies here. The family narrative comes to a close, to be replaced by a national one as the Book of Exodus opens. On his deathbed, Jacob's words fall short of what he intends. He leaves sentences unfinished. A sense of concealment lurks; the essential truths we seek hide from view. In the Torah scroll, our parashah begins in the middle of a paragraph, making it difficult to find. Many commentators link that scribal choice to the sense that we do not hear from Jacob all that he wants to say before he dies. The Sfat Emet suggests that although truth hides, it wants to be discovered. Seeking and finding the truths of our lives, and the Divine thread that connects all truth, is the work of our lives. But just as Jacob could not simply tell his children what he knew, we cannot absorb what we most need to learn about our own lives by having the truth handed to us. Meaning awaits our discovery, sometimes in the darkest and most difficult places.

I am keenly aware that much of what we are learning in adversity will take a long time to process. We are beginning to identify ways to crystalize some of our learning as we plan for our return to in-person gathering, hopefully before too much longer. At the same time, some truths are clear, and one is that we miss each other a great deal. Despite all of our Zooming, we miss full, head-to-toe presence, casual conversations and catching up with acquaintances, the vibe of singing, laughing, and even crying together--all of the texture of community that reinforces our sense of belonging and cannot be reproduced electronically.

But we do try, and the effort goes a long way toward helping us feel connected. A bit of magic is happening for us as we head into Shabbat this week. Through an anonymous gift, augmented by the new Alfred A. and Lois Frank Congregational Life Fund, members of our kahal personally delivered "kiddush lunch" to our local members. It took

many cars and many combined hours to assemble and deliver all of the care packages before Shabbat. I look forward to enjoying kiddush lunch “with” you tomorrow, whether you are on screen or off screen with happy thoughts of your BIC family. To our anonymous kiddush sponsor, thank you on behalf of your grateful BIC family.

I wish all of you a *Shabbat Shalom u'm'vorach*, a Shabbat of peace and blessing, and a healthy and liberating 2021.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

01/08/21

Dear BIC Family,

What a week we have lived in the world of things and doings, constructions and destructions, divisions and defenses, and the sidelining of faith and trust. For those of you who were able to join us last evening to reflect and pray together, I hope that our online gathering provided a bit of holding, strength, and catching our breath after the unprecedented insurrection we witnessed at the heart of our democracy.

Now it is time to welcome Shabbat. Shabbat comes not to usher us into a bunker where we can escape really; quite the opposite: Shabbat opens our souls to the wider reality and possibility we possess because we are designed not only to function but to engage spiritually with the foundational truths that uphold humanity. On Shabbat, we rekindle the fires of love, decency, and our soulful urge to live in a world where justice and compassion reign in unity. The faces of our BIC family on screens, our ancient texts, and all the flavors of Shabbat help us remember the power of the human spirit, the interconnectedness on which our thriving depends, and our deepest and most sacred yearnings.

We will gather via Zoom this evening and tomorrow morning for Kabbalat Shabbat and Shabbat morning services, both including words of Torah from birthday celebrants. Last night was for sitting together in our vexation, sadness, and hope. Shabbat is a time for a more expansive peace and for raising up, together, the goodness in our hearts. I hope that in seeing one another's faces and sharing our life-affirming heritage, we will be able to find, and share, some of the inner peace and clarity we need.

Wishing you a *Shabbat shalom um'vorach*, a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy