

10/16/20

Dear BIC Family,

This is Shabbat B'reishit, when we read and reflect upon the biblical Creation narratives. The Torah could have begun with the story of the first Jewish family, or with the first *mitzvot* for leading a life of Torah. It could have begun with a bronze-age attempt to describe Creation scientifically. But instead, the Torah stakes its territory in the broad terrain of human life. It begins with the fundamental questions all humans face: What is our purpose, and what is our destiny?

We may go all our lives wondering about those questions, compelled by an internal knowing that our lives matter and the world into which we are born yearns toward goodness. We flourish when we orient ourselves to experience life as a series of profound encounters within which Creation unfolds constantly and unceasingly, and elements once feared as void or chaotic find purchase in a cosmic order. Our task, tradition teaches us, is to engage, intentionally, in the ongoing work of creation.

At BIC, we are living through a process of ongoing creation as we continue to seek ways to hold our community together and provide support, solace, and uplift through the pandemic. We have created a great deal already, and I am sure there is more yet to be conceived. Based on what you have told us, what we have learned about risk reduction, programming successes and failures as we experiment, public health realities, and more, we renew our efforts constantly. Please, if you haven't already, share your feedback and ideas with us in the survey we sent yesterday so that we can be as informed and creative as possible.

On November 28, we will try a new Shabbat morning practice. Anticipating that many of us will feel a keen need for connection during Thanksgiving weekend, we want to offer a meaningful Shabbat experience that week. We plan to gather online for 45 minutes to sing Shabbat melodies and learn Torah together on that day. We'll be eager to hear your feedback.

It will be windy over our lakes this Shabbat, like the Biblical world before the first day, when a wind from God swept over the water. It will also be the last Shabbat before our first, predicted snow this season. Most of all, it will be resplendent. For one, precious day, we would do well to put aside the human-created chaos around us and dwell as fully as possible in the blessing of living in an incredibly, majestically beautiful natural world. After many weeks of Shabbat services, I will miss davening with you tomorrow,

but this will be a good Shabbat for us to encounter the grandeur of *Parashat B'reishit* by getting outdoors, or at least by sitting in front of a window. I'll be thinking of you.

Shabbat shalom um'vorakh. Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

10/23/20

Dear BIC Family,

The Shabbat on which we read the story of Noah and the Ark is a great time to reflect how we are riding out this time of uncertainty. Noah had one ark in which his family floated safely while the rest of the world perished. We, by contrast, float on different rafts, responding to what we are learning about COVID-19 containment and navigating our way through the pandemic together. We share collectively in the losses, stresses, and quest for experiences of connection, community, and normalcy and our search for hope and solace.

Our staff and lay leadership continue to work as a team to make decisions about how best to meet changing needs. Incremental changes to our Shabbat practices continue to develop as we discover how best to provide different kinds of experiences you seek. I am inspired by the thoughtful decision making, tireless assessment of needs and services, and earnest consideration of feedback that undergird our processes.

Whereas God takes care of Noah in the story, we rely on each other, using our collective resources to navigate our way. We depend on our relationships to help us thrive as best we can during this difficult time. We bank on the earnestness, humility, honesty, and intelligence of our *kahal* to respond to the evolving circumstances we face. Week by week, your engagement, and sharing of helpful feedback steer us. I am confident that with your help, we can still do better validate and give hope to our efforts.

Next week, I'll be on vacation. Upon my return, I look forward to rolling out more opportunities to gather on Shabbat mornings, with new ways to use our technology to meet diverse interests. (Click [here](#) to review the information we sent out yesterday.) Times, routines, and delivery platforms will vary from week to week. In a spirit of curiosity and confidence, we will continue to learn what works best. I look forward to all of it and hope to see you there.

With the coming of Shabbat, let's put all of that aside and welcome the precious gift of sacred time, calling us lovingly toward the purest expression of our best selves. May the peace of Shabbat wash over us, bringing whispers of God's own hope for our flourishing on earth.

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

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

10/30/20

Dear BIC Family,

I'm supposed to be on vacation, but with the election on our minds, I wanted us to feel each other's presence as we head into Shabbat. Many of us feel anxious about the upcoming election and what will come next. The worsening of the pandemic, especially in Wisconsin, adds to a sense of powerlessness. We yearn for our country to heal in so many ways. We worry that every vote will not count, and we see a difficult road ahead even if every vote *is* counted.

Our Torah understands being counted as a raising up of each person. When a census is taken, the word used for "count" also means "raise up." In this country, voting is how we raise ourselves up to be counted. It has sacred overtones, even in the public sphere.

Our sages model a democratic ideal through texts and stories that reinforce the importance of the people's voice. For example, in the Talmud, God asks Moses: "Is Betzalel worthy, in your opinion, to design the Tabernacle and oversee its construction?" Moses answers, "Ruler of the Universe, if Betzalel is worthy before *You*, how could he possibly not be worthy before *me*?" God says to Moses: "Even so, go and ask the people" (*BT B'rakhot 55a*).

Clearly, in the rabbinic view, even God cannot appoint a communal leader by fiat. If God demands human participation in selecting a leader, how much more so should citizens in a democracy demand it of each other and do everything possible to solicit every vote.

For us, voting and counting every vote are serious moral issues, and the stakes are incredibly high. The coming week will be critical for our country. The future of our

democracy hangs in the balance, along with fundamental understandings of civility, justice, and truth. To thrive as Jewish Americans, we need systems and policies that allow us to live out our values and practices, in a culture that honors difference and treasures humanity.

On November 2, the night before the election, at 6 pm, renowned meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg will offer an hour-long program including two short, guided meditations to help us cultivate calm, stability, and connection. She writes: “We practice in order to cultivate a sense of agency, to understand that a range of responses is open to us...to have the space in the midst of adversity to recall our values...and to find support in our inner strength and in one another.” It’s free. I’m going. You can register here:

<https://www.union.fit/events/insight-meditation-society-stability-in-the-storm-a-pre-election-day-meditation-sit-with-sharon-salzberg>

If you have not yet voted, summon your patience, round up whatever snacks you need to wait as long as necessary, and get thyself to the polls. Know that you cannot be denied the right to vote as long as you are in line before the time the polls officially close. If you need help getting to the polls or waiting it out, let us know and we will do our best to help you.

On election night, I’ll be on an online prayer vigil with my colleagues across the country. I expect to be interrupted. Let me know how you are managing and how I can support you.

Maybe there will be a landslide and an incontrovertible winner, as many predict. But we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that we may not know the outcome of the election for many days, perhaps even weeks or months. We must be prepared to wait as long as it takes for every vote to be counted. We must be prepared to demand that our government be accountable to the people of Wisconsin and the United States of America. We must not surrender our power or our dignity in whatever process will unfold, however fraught it may be.

Together, we will strive, as we always do, to be a principled, moral force for human dignity. We will seek justice and a thriving republic built on a foundation of decency, truth, and justice. And through whatever comes, we will support one another with care and respect.

And now, it’s time for one of the best tools in our Jewish toolkit: Shabbat. We need this day to remind ourselves of who we are and what kind of world we aspire to create--but

not through busy-ness and worldly business. This Shabbat especially, let us take time to remember that we are more than our work, that we are all precious, significant, and imbued with sacred purpose. I recommend 25 hours as the optimal dose. Then, we will bring ourselves into the world, more whole and ready to take part in its ongoing creation.

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

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

11/6/20

Dear BIC Family,

As we set our intentions for Shabbat, let's exhale deeply and release what we can let go so and make room for the peace and joy of Shabbat. We put our faith in the human spirit and our democracy on the line this week. It is not over, but we have done what we were called to do in the week now waning.

Our Torah reading this week includes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, for their evil and selfish lack of humility and disregard for the well being of the vulnerable. They would have been saved if there were only ten good men among them, but they were too far gone. How fortunate are we to live in a country with regular opportunities to examine how we are being led and correct our course if we believe we should. Yet we have seen how fraught that process can be, in a country deeply divided and in need of healing.

I offer this prayer to help us transition to a place of more serenity (and less CNN):

For the gifts of breath and body, flesh and blood, and all of our senses,

We thank You, Eternal One.

You have given us the tools we need to heal our bruised hearts,

Breath by breath and moment by moment.

As Shabbat draws near, help us find the peace we need

To nurture the eternity planted within our souls.

Help us to rest our minds and restore our balance.

Let us loosen what is tight and feel the sacred strength of our purest yearnings.

Help us to release the thoughts that constrict us and bring tenderness to our being.

*Bathe us in light so that we may see our lives clearly.
Expand our hearts through Your love and Your grace.
Unite us in Your truth and goodness
So that we can be a force for justice and compassion
In ever widening circles of presence and hope.*

Love and commitment are on full display in the BIC community! This week included sharing memories of loved ones at minyan, ongoing classes and sign-ups for new learning opportunities, and Lilah Heifetz's bat mitzvah aufruf on Thursday. At Kabbalat Shabbat services this afternoon, we will celebrate the aufruf of Quinn Buczak and Betsy Rademan. Tomorrow morning, we will celebrate Lilah Heifetz becoming a bat mitzvah. Quinn and Betsy's wedding will follow Shabbat, as well as the start of our major project to confront racism.

Love will pour into any open space, and it saves us. So this Shabbat, let's make lots of space to welcome love. May our rest give us the strength we need to redeem ourselves, country and our world.

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

With love,
Rabbi Betsy