

May 22, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

We've been doing a lot of counting lately: counting the Omer (the days between Pesach and Shavuot), the *Hesger* (the "Safer at Home" Quarantine), and numbers that help us understand the effects of Covid-19. We are measuring our gathering places and estimating the number of people who may attend this or that service or program in the days and weeks ahead. We are counting days of Shloshim and Shiva as members of our kahal grieve recent losses.

We will complete our counting of the Omer this coming week. Please join us for our pre-Shavuot services and Yizkor on Thursday evening, followed by our Tikkun Leil Shavuot, which promises to offer outstanding and relevant Torah learning for all of us. Important: if you plan to participate in the online Tikkun option, you MUST sign up in advance! (Register via email to education@bethisraelcenter.org.)

We are also counting our blessings! Every morning, Sunday through Friday, BIC members gather on screen to bless the Eternal Unfolding of Being for the gifts of another day--the ability to walk outside in a world thriving in resplendence, to put our feet down on solid ground, to see, to serve, to love and be loved, to be present for one another, and so much more. As we began the Book of Numbers this week, we counted the blessing of Torah in our lives, and the structures that unroll reliably in our lives--the closing of a Book and the start of another, the hope of new insight and new growth.

This past week, The PorterNotes Podcast aired an interview with me, the fourth in their series, "Faith in Modern Times." I encourage you to listen to it, all the way to the end, where the interviewer and producer share some of the insights they gained about the Jewish People from our conversation. As

we prepare to receive Torah anew in the coming week, it may give you food for thought. I'll be eager to hear what you think and discuss ideas that surprise you or resonate with you. You can find it here: PorterNotes.com

The Book of Numbers, in Hebrew, is called "*B'midbar*," meaning "In the Wilderness of..." The next word in the Torah is "Sinai." We, however, typically call this book "*BAmidbar*," mispronouncing the first syllable. It changes the meaning. The word we say, "*Bamidbar*," means "In the Wilderness." Indeed, we spend most of our lives on a journey, often feeling as if we are trekking through a vast wilderness terrain. It is no accident that this Book takes the biblical narrative to its final scene, on the verge of entering Canaan, but still not yet there. "Are we there yet" is not just a backseat question for children. It is the question we spend most of our lives deflecting so that we can live into the moments we are given and build lives within the journey itself.

Yet, even though the journey is where life happens, human beings like to count and seek to quantify, as a way of ordering and understanding our lives and our world.

For the past 2 1/2 decades, at least one of my kids could always tell you how many days were left before the start of the coming Camp Ramah season. All of our Wisconsin Jewish camps capitalize on the power of adolescent social dynamics paired with accessible role models to provide unparalleled, transformative experiences of identity-forming, Jewish living, and skills building. One cannot overstate the value of Jewish camp. According to years of research at Brandeis University, the Jewish summer camp experience is the single most effective predictor of future Jewish identity and commitment, with Ramah at the top of the list (see, for example: <https://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/events/powerofjc/index.html>). All Wisconsin Jewish summer camps, day and residential, serve as the summer home for Jewish communal life and learning for BIC's children and adolescents. We put a lot of energy and resources there, because we are

richer as a community because of those camps. Our partnership with Ramah is one of the drivers of our Talmud Torah's educational standards, and all of our Jewish camps help us to raise the strongly identified young adults we produce here.

During the past week, Ramah weighed in as the last of our Jewish residential camps to announce that there will be no camp this year. These pandemic-related closures mark a huge loss for all of us, and especially for BIC'S campers and staff who pine for camp all year. Each summer at camp is irreplaceable. My heart goes out to all of our campers, camp staff, and their families. This summer will be a different kind of wilderness experience, one that I know is painful to contemplate at this point.

There is scarcity in many places at this time, and those of us who are able must find ways to help meet human needs now and in the months ahead. Needless to say, summer tuition and donations sustain our summer camps. I humbly ask all who are able to support Jewish summer camps at this time. No donation is too small. My own family reached very deep to donate to Ramah, in gratitude to the camp that helped us raise our kids. None of them would be who they are today without Camp Ramah.

Ultimately, we all discover the truths of our lives in one wilderness or another. We are living through a global wilderness moment because of COVID-19. It, too, has a Torah to teach. Our rabbis teach that Torah is given in the wilderness because the wilderness is open to all. We will celebrate our diversity as we chant and learn a bit about the *Book of Ruth*, as part of our Thursday evening service. As we head into Shabbat, though, I invite all of us to explore the diversity within our own natures. There is a new Torah to be received at this season. If we open our hearts to receive it, Torah will find each of us in the exact place where we need it to take root. May this Shabbat bring us the peace we need to draw near to our own, personal Sinai.

Shabbat Shalom um'vorach. I wish you a Shabbat of peace and blessing,
Rabbi Betsy

June 5, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

This Shabbat, I urge you to rest and rejuvenate. Indulging the gift of Shabbat is our precious heritage. Get outside. Meditate. Read. Daven. Eat well. Nap. Learn Torah. Love the ones you're with. Do whatever gives your mind respite and elevates your soul.

Rest on Shabbat, because we have work to do. We have blessing to bring to the people of this world, to the earth, and to those closest to us. We'll bring ourselves more fully to the living Torah of the work week if we take advantage of the Torah of Shabbat starting tonight.

This week's *parashah*, *Naso*, brings us the priestly blessing that Aaron and his sons were to offer to the People of Israel, the same blessing that we offer to our children, to a marrying couple under their *chuppah*, to a baby at a brit ceremony, and to an emerging adult upon reaching the age of *mitzvot*. As I studied those words this week, I came upon a *d'var Torah* by Rabbi Shai Held, which echoed my thoughts; some of my remarks below follow his order of presentation.

Many interpretations of those three verses of blessing can be found. We can also learn from the words that precede and follow the command to bless. The section begins: "The Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel; say to them: May the Lord bless and protect you... It ends: "Thus they (the priests) shall place

My name on the People of Israel, and I Myself will bless them” (Numbers 6:22-17).

The language of the priestly blessing instruction teaches us that Aaron and his sons do not, in fact, bless the people. Rather, their role is to *channel* God’s blessings. The priests are conduits of God’s beneficence and not the source of the blessings they convey. That is why the blessings are given in the language of “May the Lord...” The priests are guided toward God’s intention so that it will flow from their mouths and their presence into the hearts of the people.

You and I are also conduits for blessing. In a world without priests, we all serve that function for one another. The Sfat Emet teaches that when we act in accord with God’s will, God’s blessings flow to us more abundantly. Every bit of service reveals our connection to the Divine guidance we have transformed into a conscious part of our being. Even a small act brings more of God’s light into our consciousness so that we may grow in goodness, the blessings we receive flowing out through our actions to bless others as well.

Moreover, the *brachah* that the priests recite before invoking God’s blessings tells us about how one ought to prepare to channel blessing: “Blessed are You, Lord...who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless God’s people with love.” Aaron is known in the midrash as a peacemaker who goes among the Israelites, helping to resolve conflicts and restore relationships among the nation. The Mishnah calls him “a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace, one who loved people and brought them closer to Torah” (Avot 1:12). He and his sons must return to those essential traits of loving kindness and peace seeking before they can turn to bless the nation.

We are always producing effects on our world, whether through intentional action or passive inaction. It is worth asking ourselves, “What am I

channeling?” at any given moment. When we hear harshness in our voices, we may ask ourselves whom we are emulating: is it someone like Aaron, the lover of peace, or are we following a less constructive voice that calls us away from our truest intentions? When we respond to current events, what values and dispositions do we want to project?

In the week just past, much passion was channeled following the death of George Floyd, leaving a wake of rage, despair, and destruction. And hope, and resolve to right the wrongs that led to his fate. At last week’s rally, I channeled anger and despair. This week, I am channeling hope, and love--huge love, in fact, because that’s what it will take to do the work before us. I will be one of the speakers at the Black Lives Matter Solidarity March this Sunday. BIC members who feel that it is prudent health-wise will march with signs (come and get one from the vestibule off the BIC parking lot entrance after 3 pm, while supplies last), wearing face masks, and making a concerted effort to stay six feet apart from each other. I hope that you will join your BIC family there, if you are able--but only if you feel it is safe for you in light of Covid-19 concerns. If the crowd appears too thick, please move to the sidelines to maintain safe distance. If you can’t march this Sunday, there are other ways to get involved, and more opportunities will evolve as our Social Justice Committee’s new plans take shape.

Meanwhile, it is time for us to bring Shabbat into our hearts. Living Torah means taking action against injustice, no more and no less than it also means receiving the gifts of Shabbat. That balance is part of what makes Jewish practice so profoundly life-giving.

Shabbat Shalom uM’vorach--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing,
Rabbi Betsy

6/12/20

Dear BIC Family,

This Shabbat marks 13 weeks since we closed our doors. When I entered our sanctuary today to prepare for our first online Shabbat service, I felt as if our Ner Tamid, the light that is always on, above the Aron (Ark), were beckoning me, saying “I’m still here, I’ve missed you, and I know that you’ve missed me.” Our first online Shabbat service coincides with the reading of Parashat *B’ha’alot’cha*, in which the first Ner Tamid is lit. That Ner Tamid was a *menorah*, whose 7 lamps Aaron would kindle each day, as a symbol of the eternal flame in each human heart, linking us to one another and to God.

Our mystics of old taught, as the *Sfat Emet* explains, that when Moses received Torah at Sinai, God gave him pure light--no tablets, no profusion of narrative, law, and poetry, but God’s very self, given as a Divine kiss. Quickly, however, it became apparent that ordinary people would not be able to maintain a sense of spirituality and God-awareness without specific practices. Through our rituals, we seek to make the Divine Presence manifest in our everyday lives. On Shabbat, we are granted extra attunement, an “extra soul,” enabling us to glimpse more of God’s light; in other words, Shabbat offers us a chance to experience God’s spiritual essence more powerfully. At BIC, our Shabbat rituals help us to share God’s presence and hold it as a community as we daven, sing, and rejoice together. After 12 weeks without that opportunity, I look forward eagerly to raising our spirits together, with our own Ner Tamid and Aron Kodesh as backdrop, as your prayer leaders and I daven from our sanctuary. The message we sent earlier this week explaining why we’re doing this now can be viewed [here](#) (in video form) or read [here](#) (text).

By now, we all know that Zoom experiences can be powerful and rewarding, yet they are not the same as being together in person. Online

Shabbat can help sustain us in an emergency, yet those who choose to participate must be prepared for the spiritual challenges involved.

Even under normal circumstances, entering sacred space requires careful intention and a special mindset. Davening together in cyberspace will demand concentrated efforts on all of our parts.

My colleague, Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky, shared this message with his *kahal* from which we, too can benefit: “What we do in shul is serious, and deserves to be taken seriously. Our devices do not always promote seriousness or focus. The Medieval Spanish master R. Bachya ibn Pakuda warned us to combat the spiritual malady he called *pizzur ha'nefesh*, "the scattering of the soul." (And he never even heard of the internet.) Let us take his advice. We may have to use a device for Shabbat now. Don't let it use you.”

In our Torah reading, each of Israel's 12 tribal chiefs brings an offering. In order to make the most of our Shabbat service, I offer the following 12 points of information and guidance:

1. Services will begin at 10 am and end around 11:30, followed by Kiddush and opportunities for on-screen schmoozing; [click here to join](#). This is the approximate timing:

10:00 - *P'sukei D'zimrah* (starting with *Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbat*)

10:15 - *Shacharit*

10:45 - (Very) Modified Torah Service

11:05 - *Musaf*

11:30 - *Kiddush & Schmooze*

2. You need your own *Siddur*. So that we can see each other, the siddur will *not* be on the screen. **Click here to download and print a copy of Siddur Lev Shalem before Shabbat.**
3. We will be using Zoom. You will not need to type a password or anything else.
4. You will be muted most of the time. **Please do not unmute yourself** unless specifically asked to do so. When you are unmuted, be aware that everyone will hear all sounds near your computer, tablet, or phone--including whispering and environmental noise.
5. Sing out loud. God can hear you even when you are muted on Zoom! Stand and “*shuckel*,” clap or dance. Just watching is, well, just watching. Make an effort to get inside the experience.
6. FOCUS. Turn your gaze inward. Take the time you need to breathe deeply. Sit still. Breathe deep. Take your time. Close your eyes if you like. Close all the other apps and windows on your device.
7. **Everyone will see you** participating. Help us all stay focused and connected to each other by remaining present and engaged. When people get up and do other things during a Zoom session, it can be distracting for everyone. Smile, if you feel like it. Let us see your radiant face. We miss you.
8. Dress for shul, cover your head, and wrap yourself in your tallit. Your home is your sanctuary--and ours.
9. Know that the small number of participants in the sanctuary will all be wearing masks, pursuant to our shul’s Covid-19 practices. That will feel strange to all of us. These are not normal times.
10. Zoom works well enough, nearly always. Occasionally, a session will crash; when this happens, all Zoom users are affected, not only us, and unfortunately it is beyond our control to fix. Also, please remember that we’re new at this. We expect to learn a lot as we move forward, discovering what works best. Please be patient as our strategies and tactics evolve.
11. You will not have to log on during Shabbat itself. The Zoom session will be set up to begin before Shabbat starts, and you can

turn on your device and “join” the “meeting” before Shabbat. If you disable your device’s screensaver or sleep function, it will be ready to go on Shabbat morning. That’s what I will do, and I encourage you to do the same. Also, the “chat” function (a form of writing) will be disabled, and the service will not be recorded.

12. After the service concludes, we will use Zoom’s “breakout room” feature to form reasonably sized conversation groupings. It’ll be a little bit like finding a table in the Social Hall. You’ll need to unmute yourself when you want to talk to others in the breakout room.

I wish all of us the illumination of Shabbat this week, whether you’ll be davening on your own or on-screen. One of our greatest strengths is our vibrant and diverse commitment to each other and Jewish tradition.

Shabbat Shalom U’m’vorach--A Shabbat of Peace and Blessing to All,
Rabbi Betsy

June 19, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

14 weeks into our quarantine, organized, in-person life is opening up more, as Dane County takes on Phase 2 practices. At BIC, plans are underway for *Kabbalat Shabbat* in the park, weddings, conversions, youth programming, and more--all, of course, with restrictions, and all, I’m sure, with some amount of trepidation. As much as we have yearned to see each other from the neck down, and we want to touch people outside of our households, it feels a bit frightening to emerge from the relative safety of our homes, especially when we don’t know how the virus will behave in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

This week’s פרשה, *Shlach L’cha*, portrays our biblical ancestors overtaken by fear, upon hearing a calumnious report from 10 of 12 spies, just returned

from reconnoitering the Land of Canaan. The crux of the nation's fear lies not the details of the spies' report so much as in their collective lack of faith. The Israelites do not believe they have what it takes to carry out their destiny. Even a contested report with wildly imagined details is enough to send them over the edge, where their flimsy faith in God's providence fails, and they are doomed to die in the wilderness.

God forgives the Israelites for their lack of faith, but they must pay the price of their faithlessness. As it happens, they would rather die in the desert than risk not making it in Canaan. They would rather not even try. Therein lies God's disappointment. Their punishment gives them what they need: permission to abandon their mission. But that proves too demoralizing, both for them and for God. The nation rejects its fate and rushes up to Canaan, only to be punished by Amalekite and Canaanite warriors. The dejected Israelites limp back to the wilderness, hopeless.

What does our demoralized God do now? It is hard to tell. At this point, the narrative is interrupted by Divine instructions pertaining to life after settling in Canaan--a goal only two of those addressed will attain. Then comes a story, probably from an earlier time, about a man who is stoned for gathering wood on Shabbat, which leads into the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. Thus, our parashah have shifts from seeing the Land to seeing blue cords attached to the fringes of garments.

I believe our dejected God wants to offer our ancestors something positive and forward-oriented for our ancestors, something they can see and touch, that reminds them of God's interest in them, despite their circumstances. They will need to raise up an on-mission generation, and visible reminders of God's investment in their relationship will strengthen their resolve.

The Hebrew word for "fear" is related by its root letters to the word for "insight," or "seeing." The Sfat Emet teaches that fear exposes tensions calling for resolution. The best response to fear is to figure out what our fear is trying to tell us. When we dig into what motivates our fear, we see what we truly care about, what we want to protect from risk or harm, what

we don't want to lose. In the case of the spies in our parashah, imagine what might have happened if they had gotten to the source of their fear. How different the outcome might have been if they had been able to say, "we have the most inspiring, life-giving task before us--to establish a way of life the world has never seen before, based on justice and compassion--and we don't know how to do that in partnership with a God we cannot see or touch. How can we bring God closer to us? What if they had asked God that question? The story of that generation might have had a much happier ending.

For us, now, health concerns are essential. It is understandable that we feel fear for our physical well being during a pandemic. But I wonder if we fear other aspects of re-entry. Do we fear losing closeness we have rekindled with family and friends? Do we fear losing the stimulation we have enjoyed through online activities, because our pre-pandemic routines did not include them? Are we afraid to lose aspects of a simpler, less public, and less material lifestyle that we have come to appreciate? Are we concerned about losing the connections with nature we have nurtured in daily walks, and taking time to notice the changes as Winter surrendered to Spring, and Summer burst forth? It's time for us to contemplate what we do not want to lose as not-only-online life re-asserts itself, with its expectations and schedules.

Perhaps we can take a cue from the mitzvah of tzitzit. Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin ("the Netziv") compares the blue thread of the tzitzit to God--blue symbolizing Heaven--and the white threads of the other tzitzit to the embodied realities of our lives. The blue thread is to be wound around the white threads. He suggests that we endeavor to unite our inner

wholeness, symbolized by the blue thread, with the physical realities of our dedicated lives, symbolized by the white threads. What God wants--and what we need-- is to paint the canvas of our daily lives with Divine energy. Understanding our fears can point us to the changes we need to make when we re-order our lives.

Let's see what insights our "*neshamah yeteirah*," our extra Shabbat soul, wants to give us about what we have learned during the past 14 weeks. I pray that what we learn at this in-between time will inspire us to live more attuned, soulful lives in the months and years ahead.

Shabbat Shalom uM'vorach. I wish you all a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy