

6/26/2020

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

When is the last time you fell on your face? It's a trick question, because at daily minyan, we all do, at the end of the Amidah. It's called "*n'filat apayim.*" Echoing King David, we say, "Let us fall into the hands of Adonai, for great is God's compassion..." Down go our heads onto our forearms, and we lean forward, for a few minutes pouring out our hearts to the Eternal Unfolding of Being, a.k.a. God.

But that is not the same as actually falling on our faces. In this week's *parashah*, *Korach*, Moses falls on his face immediately after a band of some 250+ Israelite chiefs challenges his leadership and authority, claiming that Moses is not entitled to his privilege, because the entire community is holy. Traditional interpreters suggest that Moses falls on his face so that God will tell him what to answer back to the rebels, but it could mean many things.

Biblical characters fall on their faces in many scenes, including just last week, in the Incident of the Spies. There, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces in response to the nation's demand to die in the desert or return to Egypt, rather than attempt the conquest of Canaan expected of them. Falling on one's face conveys helplessness, dismay, submission, propitiation, fear, and, sometimes, awe. It is always a response, nearly always fraught, often transactional, and, based on its terminology, always face-down. Whether as part of daily prayers or a scene in a biblical narrative, falling on one's face never is understood to be a serene or spiritually uplifting experience, even if one hopes for uplift to ensue afterward.

I often find it moving to fall on my face during prayer. It connects me to my biblical ancestors and to Jewish people throughout the ages who have poured out their hearts to God.

But as Shabbat draws near, my soul yearns to fall differently.

Shabbat invites us to fall in the other direction, with our faces upturned, our hearts open, our souls expectant. Shabbat calls us to fall into love, to surrender joyfully into the freedom of one's deepest knowing, the place from which goodness arises. Shabbat beckons us into a relationship of flow, rather than transaction, and of shared presence, rather than face-down separation. Where falling on one's face implies an element of willful humiliation, Shabbat is an exercise of giving one's soul, and one's self,

permission to soar. Where falling on one's face blocks out the light, Shabbat pours Divine light over our faces and everything that makes us who we are.

Let's fall up a lot this Shabbat.

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

With love,  
Rabbi Betsy

7/3/2020

Dear BIC Family,

We close our 15th week of quarantine with a rise in Covid-19 cases locally and nationally, joyful summer events upended and reconceived in light of our need to protect life.

This week's Torah reading, a *double-parashah*, includes many significant events, including the enigmatic story of Balak and Balaam. Balak, the Moabite king, commissions Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet, to curse the Israelites. God permits Balaam to do so, at his own risk, but warns the would-be curser of his folly. When the moment comes to utter a curse, Balaam looks out over the Israelite encampment and can only utter words of blessing and praise, including the well-known, now liturgical statement, "How good are your tents, [children of] Israel, your dwelling places, [children of] Jacob!" (*"Ma tovu ohalekha Yaacov, mishk'notekha Yisrael!"*)

What made our ancestors' tents and dwelling places "good?" We really don't know. The most well-known explanation suggests that they were united as a *kahal* while still respectful of one another's privacy; specifically, the openings to their dwellings were arranged so that they could not peer from one home into another.

In some ways, the pandemic turns that picture on its head. We cannot unite as a *kahal*, and we have seen inside many people's private homes in our daily interactions. We sit in virtual classrooms with teachers whose beds are in the background. We hear birds chirping outside of colleagues' kitchen windows, interact with esteemed people as they sweat in shorts and tee shirts on their backyard decks, and so on. We stare intently at faces on screens, and they stare back at us.

And yet, we, too, behold blessings despite the pandemic's very real curses, individually and even as a Beth Israel Center *kahal*. The connections we are building in cyberspace are deepening relationships from one dwelling to another as we pray, study, and meet together. We are giving more of ourselves to community members in need. We have learned how to schmooze on Zoom and how to hold reflective space and for each other. Talking heads on screens are doing deep work together, building for a strong future and making plans for our High Holy Day observances. The "tent" that is Beth Israel Center continues to thrive, albeit not in its glory, with an empty sanctuary.

We all know that online connection is not the same as moving through the seasons of our lives as a *kahal* together in our building, and the separation may be especially difficult for those in our *kahal* whose schedules make it difficult to join us at our daily online offerings. Soon, we will install new, more Shabbat-friendly streaming equipment in our sanctuary, which will enable us to offer online Shabbat services more regularly beginning in mid-August. We look forward to that, as we await the joyful day when our voices will fill the building.

Meanwhile, here comes another opportunity to receive many of the abundant blessings Shabbat offers. The Jewish people have kept Shabbat as a saving treasure, in the worst of times and in the best of times. Let us enter that palace in time with open hearts. May it bring us peace.

Shabbat Shalom, with love,  
Rabbi Betsy

7/10/2020

Dear BIC Family,

Question: What kind of a person envisions a more just society and advocates for their privileged peers to elevate its marginalized and vulnerable members, at their own expense?

Answer: Someone who sees brokenness in our world with their entire being, not only their eyes.

When Pastor Everett Mitchell asked me to speak at the faith rally after the murder of George Floyd, he told me that I was the one God had called to bring the voice of

Jeremiah. Whoah. That was a tall order. I went off and re-read Jeremiah, wondering if God really had called me to that moment, and, if so, whether I was prepared to answer that call with full embodiment and consciousness. And, I read Amos, the privileged prophet who puts it all on the line, taking our People to task for stepping over the vulnerable and marginal for their own aggrandizement.

It is difficult to speak like a prophet, especially when not called to prophesy. But talking like Jeremiah felt much easier to me than it feels to truly heed the call to change the way things are. Until that voice resounds within our hearts and speaks in the language of our own souls, it will be heard, but not heeded with commitment and determination. The prophetic voice calling out for compassion and justice is the one, I would suggest, that we need to heed now.

This week, we entered into the 3 weeks before Tisha B'Av. Thursday was the 17th of Tammuz, the date on which the journey of t'shuvah begins, culminating in the High Holy Days. The 17th of Tammuz corresponds to the day on which Moses saw our ancestors' apostasy and broke the first set of tablets. This is the week when we turn to discover what is broken--in our world and in our hearts--and when we linger long enough to see the connection between the two. This is the week when we crack open the psychological armor that reassures us, for 9 months of the year, that we are righteous enough, the time when we ask ourselves, "But are we, really, good enough, when brokenness lies before us?"

How do we find that inner voice, and how do we heed it?

Perhaps part of the answer begins in the regular haftarah that would have been attached to our weekly parashah, Pinchas, were it not for the 17th of Tammuz changing the order of our readings. The would-have-been reading from I Kings picks up on the zeal of Pinchas, an Israelite who rushes to slay an idolously cavorting couple. In I Kings, it is Elijah who, zealous for God, must flee for his life after defeating idolatrous prophets with extraordinary spectacle and sword. Elijah flees from there to Sinai, where he encounters God in a "still, small, voice." In an online class "at" Hadar I attended this week, our teacher, Dena Weiss, brought a midrash (Shemot Rabbah 29:9) that weaves the motifs of zeal and uncaring, fanfare and quiet, to extract a message.

The midrash explores the dynamics of "very loud and very quiet." "Very loud" relates to zeal, force, and spectacle, demonstrated by Pinchas and Elijah, and also by God, at the Sinai Revelation. "Very quiet" relates to the "still, small voice" Elijah hears, recalled in the "*Un'taneh Tokef*" prayer we recite on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, and *also* at

the moment of Revelation, when the great voice, booming in the air, suddenly “does not continue.” A voice that does not continue, proposed Weiss, is a voice that speaks so clearly to the core of its listener that there is no echo or confusion. The voice we heard at Sinai, calling us to walk differently in the world, was a voice of total clarity that evoked a deep knowing within the soul of the entire House of Israel, all the way up to the present moment.

It can be so hard to hear that voice, and even harder to heed it. We live in a world that is full of spectacle, complexity, distraction, and noise. Studying those texts on this particular week made me wonder: What gets in the way of my own moral clarity, crippling my ability to listen and to heed the call of my deepest goodness? I ask you the same question--and I offer you a free ticket that will help you find your way closer to the answers you seek.

I humbly offer the 25 hours that begin as we welcome Shabbat. Shabbat will not solve all of our problems. It won't heal the brokenness in our hearts and around us. But it can sensitize us to hear and trust what our souls know is possible. And it is precisely in the space between what is “good enough” and what is possible where lie our work, our growth, and our collective flourishing. May we find the quiet we need, this Shabbat.

Shabbat shalom, with love,  
Rabbi Betsy

Dear BIC Family,

Normally, we would be reading a double-Torah portion this week, filled with hope and innovation. We would have stood for the final verse and chanted “*Hazak, Hazak, v'nithazeik*” -- Strong, strong, and let us strengthen ourselves!” Ironically, we may feel those words more poignantly this week than we normally do, faced with the fact that we have missed reading another, entire Book of Torah together since our quarantine began.

Except that we have not missed it, at least not entirely. In truth, we have read and studied from every parashah, week by week: in *divrei Torah* at our online Kabbalat Shabbat services; at morning minyan, where we chant from the parashah on Mondays and study it on Thursdays; through these weekly Shabbat letters, which are usually *divrei Torah*; and in the *parashah* reflections we receive each week from Matt Banks. We have replaced a full reading each week with coverage of each *parashah* in more

ways than we had before the pandemic. New creativity has emerged from the ruptures the pandemic has wrought. As I reflect on our plans for this week's Pride Shabbat, and for the upcoming High Holy Days and beyond, the ways in which we are constructing meaning and order from the chaos of pandemic life amaze and inspire me.

This week's Torah reading brings a shift in tone among our biblical ancestors. No longer anxious and despairing, faith and hope animate their actions, as they prepare to settle the Promised Land. I wish I could write a glib line about how we, too, are more hopeful now than we were four months ago, but that would be false. Yet, how instructive it is that every year, we connect with our ancestors' enthusiasm for the way of life they will establish in Canaan, at the same time when we are preparing for *Tisha B'Av*, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, commemorating the destruction of the Temple and our exile from that same, Promised Land. The chaos of exile, uncertainty, and the vagaries of history always breathes through the Jewish psyche together with the promise of redemption, and especially at this season.

The Jewish People have always been keenly aware that our lives are constructed out of chaos, that chaos, in fact, is so foundational to the entire universe that we must concede it is God's plan that we build lives upon it. The sage Bar Kappara taught: If it had not been written in the Torah, it would have been impossible for us to come out and say the following: God created the heavens and earth from what?! From chaos-- "And the earth was *tohu vavohu*--vapidness and chaos, with darkness hovering over the depths" (Bereishit Rabbah 1)!" We would not otherwise have fathomed that it was God's plan to erect Creation over a bed of chaos. But, as we are told from the start, that is exactly what happened, at least allegory. And why would that be so? I would suggest it is to give humanity the privilege and opportunity to become moral people who create lives of justice and mercy.

Early in our *davening* every morning, we lean into the tension between chaos and order. We ask, "What are we? What is our life? Our goodness? Our righteousness? Our achievement? Our power? After all, is not the sum of our deeds is chaos?" And two second later, we affirm: "We are partners to Your (God's) covenant. How blessed we are; how good is our portion" (*Siddur Lev Shalem*, pp. 105-106)! The daily reminder of our resolve to build meaningful structures based on morality tells us to trust what our hearts know is possible: however small we are in the universe, it matters when we live with intention and purpose.

Just as our ancestors did, we can meet in the process of working toward our own redemption. When we ritualize putting on a mask, and when we "count the quarantine"

with a *bracha*, when we show up for one another however it is possible, and when we find new paths to inspiration, we are taking an active part in our redemption. We also need quiet time to hear the still, small voice that informs our consciousness. In the melding of “*Zimrat Yah*,”--Divine melody--with our own strength, we find our way out of darkness and chaos. The Sfat Emet writes often of this idea. On this week’s parashah, which includes laws about taking oaths, he offers the following: Our souls intuit what is the right course, but we struggle to actualize our good intentions fully. Our privilege gets in the way, and we don’t push ourselves to give all that we can. Davening and reciting the Shema incline our hearts toward making our intentions manifest. I would add (because I really think he left it out accidentally): That is always true, but *especially* on Shabbat.

Shabbat offers so many opportunities to strip away the confusion and distractions that limit our vision. This Shabbat, I look forward to davening and reciting Shema with you at our online, Pride Shabbat service. I also look forward to the learning and discussion to follow our service. The Jewish People have come a long way from the chaos of not understanding the rights of LGBTQ+ people to the inclusivity that characterizes the BIC community. Please come and celebrate Shabbat, the Pride journey, and the close of our fifth Book of Torah, with me and our BIC family--the sacred *kahal* with which we find goodness, purpose, and meaning amidst chaos.

*Shabbat shalom u’m’vorach*--Wishing you a Shabbat of peace and blessing,  
Rabbi Betsy