

Raise Ourselves Up
Shabbat Chol HaMo'ed Shabbat -
Rabbi Betsy Forester

There is something almost magical about the *schach* (branch covering) on the Sukkah. It's supposed to remind us of the *Annanei Kavod*, the cloud of God's presence that guided us, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness, and came to rest over the Holy of Holies in the *Beit Mikdash*, the Holy Temple. We look up and see the stars and we are transported to a time of wishes and hopes, a time when we knew we were loved and that the most powerful forces in the universe were rooting for us. Sukkot was designed to be the holiday of our most profound joy and gratitude.

In contrast to all of that good feeling, today's Torah reading is a bit jarring. It comes to us completely out of sequence--the only time of year when our regular Shabbat reading is uprooted in favor of one from a completely different book. Just when our Biblical ancestors are about to enter Canaan as a nation in our regular Torah reading cycle, here we are, reading about Moshe's anxiety and the making of the Second Tablets of the Covenant. And here it is, Sukkot; we've all got our Jewish Thanksgiving harvest festival groove on, and we are faced with Moshe's anxiety after the Sin of the Golden Calf. Of course, probably the reason we read this section is that it also includes the commandment to observe the *shalosh r'galim*, the 3 festivals--*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*, but we should not overlook the feeling of vulnerability that springs from today's Torah reading.

Dwelling in a hut at this time of year is a bit jarring, too. Just when it makes sense to cozy up indoors, out we go. And that's not random. We are supposed to feel our vulnerability as we sit outside under the stars.

If dwelling outdoors in a flimsy structure and reading about Moshe's anxiety are not enough, we read *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) this morning. Talk about existential angst! *Kohelet* voices the most profound existential fear-- that our lives have no meaning, that nothing we do holds significance or lasting value.

What do we make of these vulnerabilities and anxieties on this Shabbat of what is intended to be the holiday of our most supreme joy?

Let's consider what Moshe does with his anxiety: he tells God that he needs to feel more of God's closeness. He needs to know God better. And God obliges, saying: "I will make all My goodness pass before you...see, there is a place near Me" (Ex. 33:19, 21). God will put Moshe in a cleft of the rock, and Moshe will see God's back. There is some evidence that our ancestors believed that God could be corporeal--God could take form and have a back--but since the Medieval period Judaism clearly rejects that notion. So I don't know what it means, poetically, to see God's back, but I am struck by the word that we translate as "back." That word, "Kaf", appears many times in our Bible, and most of the time, it means "palm." The idea of seeing the metaphorical palm of God's hand appeals to me more, because there is a sense of openness, generosity, and mutuality. There is something we can make use of and something we can grasp. And, although the text does not show us the enactment of the encounter, it seems to flow into what happens next: Moshe carves new tablets and brings down the Law, this time for good, and he makes a new covenant with God on behalf of the nation.

This has been a difficult week for the United States of America and the people of Madison, Wisconsin. Stringent refugee quotas, an ICE presence here in Madison and the detention of 11 people right here in our town; and, of course, the Supreme Court justice hearing with yesterday's painful testimonies. So much vulnerability. We make terrible mistakes. What can Torah offer to us here and now?

It can offer a lot, I hope. Friends, in the face of editorials telling us that politics, civility, and human decency have declined even further and our country is tearing itself apart at its moral and communal foundations, we must raise ourselves up. We must hold fast to our belief that there is a great Good, a great Love out there, and we can strive for it. As Margaret Mead famously spoke, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." It has always been the mission of the Jewish People to stand up

for good, to work for justice, to bring Godliness into our world. We need to believe we matter--because we do, we matter very much. That belief, ultimately, is the hope of Kohelet and it is foundational to our taking responsibility for raising ourselves up.

And we need to own our incredible, beautiful vulnerability, because it is the source of our empathy. This is a moment for each of us to locate ourselves in the cleft in the rock of our own particular lives, from which each of us can reach for goodness. We need to remember that God's hand is open, calling us to raise ourselves up, calling us to lead, calling us to be our best human selves. In our Torah reading, the first tools come in the form of new tablets of law and a festival cycle. Those still are our tools, expanded upon over the centuries.

The first tablets were broken. They were all God's work and, as such, they were unsustainable. The new ones must be made with human hands. They are a joint project between human beings and God. We believe that we co-create the moral and ethical foundations of human society. Despair is not for us. We seek goodness, and we raise ourselves up from that foundation.

Rabbi (Rav) Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook zt"l, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, was a leader who stood up to the British Parliament in support of the Balfour Declaration when he found himself stranded there at the outbreak of WWI, lived in Jaffa (Yaffo) which was the seat of secular Zionism so as to be the voice of Torah there and only later moved to Jerusalem at the request of its noted rabbis where he established and headed the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva and agreed reluctantly to become Chief Rabbi of the Holy City.

Rabbi Kook was an outstanding Torah luminary and decisor, but at the same time a prolific poet, mystic, philosopher and intrepid leader, founder of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel which he saw as the spiritual leadership of the state-to-be. He is considered the founder of Religious Zionism. I find him to be a tremendously inspiring and forward-thinking biblical commentator with an abiding faith in the goodness of the human spirit.

One of his poems, "*Im Tirzeh Ben Adam*," speaks to that belief and I would like to sing with you his message that we must lift ourselves up. Each of us from our own cleft in the rock where our own name is written, each of us must call out from our deepest place of goodness. At the risk of sounding trite, we must look up at the stars and see their mirror in our own souls. I pray that we can find that light and let it guide us to raise ourselves up.

אם תרצה בן אדם

הסתכל באור השכינה
התבונן בפלאי היצירה
בחיי האלוקות שלהם

דע את המציאות
שאתה חי בה
דע את עצמך
ואת עולמך
עלה למעלה עלה
כי כוח עז לך
יש לך כנפי רוח
כנפי נשרים אבירים
אל תכחש במ
פן יכחשו לך
דרוש אותם
וימצאו לך מיד

- הרב קוק

"אורות הקודש"

If You Desire, **Human Being**
(Rav Kook, *Orot Hakodesh I*, pp. 83-84)

Look at the light of God's Presence
Gaze at the wonders of creation, at their Divine life.
Know the reality in which you live.

Know yourself and your world.

Rise up.

Rise up, for you have the strength to do so.

You have wings of the spirit, wings of powerful eagles.

Do not deny them, or they will deny you.

Seek them, and you will find them in a flash.

בן אדם

Ben Adam

Based on Rav Kook, Melody by Avigail Uziel Omer

דרוש אותם

דרוש בן אדם

וימצאו מיד

כי כוח עז לך

יש לך כנפי רוח

יש לך כנפי רוח

כנפי נשרים אבירים

אל תכחש בם

פן יכחשו לך

דרוש אותם

דרוש בן אדם

וימצאו מיד

בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

עלה למעלה עלה בן אדם

עלה למעלה עלה

כי כוח עז לך

יש לך כנפי רוח

יש לך כנפי רוח

כנפי נשרים אבירים

אל תכחש בם

פן יכחשו לך

Ben Adam, Aleh I'ma'alah aleh

Aleh I'ma'alah aleh ben adam

Aleh I'ma'alah aleh

(2X)

***Ki ko'ach az l'cha, yesh l'cha kanfei ruach
Yesh l'cha kanfei ruach, kanfei n'sharim avirim
Al tikachesh bam pen yikachashu l'cha
D'rosh otam, d'rosh, ben adam, v'yimatzu miyad.***

(2X, then return to first stanza)