

9/11/20

Dear BIC Family,

This week's double-parashah, *Nitzavim-Vayeilech*, adjures our biblical ancestors to honor their sacred covenant with God. We always read it right before Rosh HaShanah. Our biblical ancestors assemble to hear Moses exhort them to uphold a way of life based on justice and compassion in ways the world had never seen before. Likewise, we, too, will gather next week, however virtually, in communal celebration and renewed commitment to the ideals our People cherish.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, many of you responded to my outcry with calls and emails asking what we were going to do to get involved in fighting racism. I told you that plans were in the works. I am so proud to tell you that this past Tuesday evening, our Board of Directors thoughtfully considered, and then unanimously approved, an initiative that our Social Justice committee spent many weeks developing, in partnership with the Nehemiah Community Development Corporation. On Yom Kippur, I will speak about the need for the work we will undertake, and after the holidays, you will hear about how to get involved. It will be life-changing, and different from anything we've done before as a *kahal*.

Take note of what our ancestors do before they begin to enact their mission: they stand in place, together, and listen. Moshe tells them something remarkable: All of the laws, rules, and regulations that have been laid out for them, and yet will require ongoing probing and elucidation, are actually not too difficult for them. Their task may seem daunting, but they can do it, because they have internalized their commitment to building a just and moral society. The instructions God and Moshe have imparted live in the hearts and in the voices of the people, empowering them to actualize their calling.

We, too, need to stand still before we can run. We need to listen to our own narratives about racism differently so that we can learn to act differently. We will ask questions of ourselves that we never asked before. In time, we, too, will internalize what we are called to do. The first year of our work with Nehemiah will require us to stand still enough to listen probingly, discern our responsibility and path forward, and then come together as a community to act on what we have learned. Learning will be our foundational step toward bringing change. I look forward to growing with you under the guidance of our Nehemiah partners.

This Shabbat, too, is a time to stand still. It has been a difficult week in Madison. Uncertainty and worry seemed to dangle from dark clouds all week. It's time to take a

25-hour, spiritual, deep breath. We are one week away from the Days of Awe. As always, Shabbat offers us the opportunity to rejuvenate from the inside out. We need it.

Shabbat shalom um'vorach. I wish you a Shabbat of peace and blessing.

With Love,
Rabbi Betsy

9/25/20

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

This Shabbat is *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of Returning between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It offers an opportunity for us to reflect on our place in the world in joy and hope that we can improve ourselves and do our part to create a better world. It is an auspicious Shabbat to celebrate a bar mitzvah, as we will do when we call Simon Mednick to the Torah during our online services tomorrow morning. I hope you will join us via live stream. Services will, once again, be followed by an opportunity to schmooze and socialize via Zoom.

It does feel incongruous to celebrate the creation of the world and our place of honor as human beings when we are mired in anxiety over the surge in COVID-19 cases and concerned about the structural and global problems in our society that may seem intractable. We could succumb to a sense of powerlessness and resign ourselves to the world as it is, but this season calls us to take a different approach. The Jewish way is to drill down on hope.

Hope is a challenging spiritual practice. It is not the same thing as optimism, which is a belief that things will work themselves out on their own. Our tradition tends not to be optimistic; our Bible is anything but optimistic. But it is deeply hopeful.

Hope is a deeply rooted Jewish practice. In order to hope, we must believe in the possibility of change. We must be able to see ourselves, and other people, as change agents. Practicing hope requires vulnerability, putting ourselves on the line, taking a risk. Hope requires truth and honesty. False hope only masks anxiety. Real hope is a commitment. Ultimately, hope is an act of faith. A great thing about it, though, is that we can practice hope even when faith is difficult.

Our sages teach that when we are called to judgement for how we lived, we will be asked a series of questions. Did you transact business in good faith? Did you engage in family life? Did you seek knowledge and understanding of the world and the people around you? Did you build a relationship with the Divine? Did you anticipate redemption? Did you attempt to understand things from different perspectives (Bavli Shabbat 31a)? Against a backdrop of so many personal questions, the query about redemption stands out. It takes an individual beyond themselves and links them with a much broader vision.

With regard to anticipating redemption, one medieval commentator (*Chidushei Ha'RaN*) adds that each person must live in creative tension between what is in front of them in the world as it is, and the possibility of how much better it could be, and take responsibility for moving their corner of the world a bit closer to perfection.

The Slonimer Rebbe (*Netivot Shalom, Vayechi, Siman Bet*) puts a sharper point on this. He says that we are to be like scouts, looking out from a high tower. From that vantage, we can see both the suffering around us while grasping the broader reality that God did not create the world to be a place of pain and suffering. Rather, the world is good, and our lives have purpose. Although we do not know how to transform the world, our task is to trust that our efforts to make a difference will be supported and aided by a God Who seeks our help to move the world toward healing. Each person has a purpose in Creation. Our tasks are to refine our own character and take steps to fix what lies broken before us. We were created to take part in the ongoing creation of the world. We practice hope when we refuse to accept the world as it is, trust in a vision of what it should be, and commit to doing our small part to make it so.

Despite the chaos around us, let us not forget that we are created with a wired-in capacity to practice hope. Hope is active and empowering. Practicing hope is our human link and sacred task in the process of redemption. May this Shabbat open our hearts to that possibility.

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

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

10/2/20

Dear BIC Family,

This year, I truly feel the gratitude that makes Sukkot the ultimate joyful holiday in the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were everything we needed them to be. Although on the surface, services seemed strange and disorienting, we felt deeply that we stood together as we drew sustenance from the well of our traditions and arrived at the spiritual re-orienting to a life of purpose and meaning that we seek every year at this time. We felt joy together, despite everything. Standing with you as a communal family and reflecting together on what was, what is, and what we hope will be in the new year filled me with gratitude and strength in the face of the challenges that we face locally and globally.

In the spirit of gratitude, I want to say thank you for being a kahal that davened and sang together from living rooms, kitchen tables, front porches, and the shul parking lot. Thank you for trusting us, for tuning in and staying with us. We felt your presence during services under the tent top just as you felt ours in your homes. When we sang, we were singing with you. You were with us when we laughed and when we wept. Thanks, too, for filling four shifts of *tashlikh* and *shofar* blowing at Vilas park. Thank you for your emails, texts, and calls of appreciation and for confirming that you felt enveloped, enriched, loved, and inspired. Our platform was “virtual,” but nothing could be more real than what we experienced together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

I extend a huge *hakarot hatov* to our lay leadership and to our staff who spent many, many hours designing and delivering unprecedented High Holy Day observances, and to those who took part in leading davening and leining. All of you added grace and beauty to our worship.

We had an average of 160 viewers tuned in over the 10 hours of Yom Kippur stream-time, where a viewer is a device, and we know many devices were shared by couples and families. If we assume that many more than average tuned in for Kol Nidrei and far fewer participated in the afternoon meditation, it seems safe to say that at least as many people participated in our services this year as have attended in prior years. The Rosh Hashanah viewing stats tell a similar story: An average of 500 viewers (screens) watched at least part of each service.

In keeping with our halachic practices, we did not record our services, making the memories of those days even more precious. My sermons are up on our website, along with Susie Drazen’s touching d’var Torah on Erev Shabbat Shuvah. You can access them here: <http://www.bethisraelcenter.org/rabbi-foresters-sermons>

Since the final *shofar* blast, we have been busy! Our sukkah is up and ready. Our Torah submissions are being transferred to their cloth “parchment,” and the wooden handles are being carved, in preparation for the Big Reveal at 10:30 a.m. on Simchat Torah (Sunday, October 11). Many of you have enrolled in the initiative I described on Kol Nidrei night, which we are calling “Confronting Racism: BIC-Nehemiah Strategic Learning Partnership.” Many other plans for Adult Education and more have been made since you saw us on screen and will be announced soon.

As we welcome Sukkot, we celebrate both the bounty of the season and how blessed we are to be alive in a world where wonder, inspiration, and human growth are possible. May we all feel those blessings in our hearts and spread them far and wide--especially in these troubled times.

Since tonight is Erev Yom Tov, there is no Kabbalat Shabbat service. But The Schmooze is ON at 5:00. The link is below.

Shabbat shalom u'mo'adim l'simchah- Wishing you the peace of Shabbat and the joy of the festival!

With love,
Rabbi Betsy

10/09/20

Dear BIC Family,

I hope that you were able to step away from the tumult of our pandemic world and find joy during this week of Sukkot. Minyaners filled the week with song, celebration, and lulav waving every morning. I was delighted to learn with many of you on the Hadar webinar, and my colleagues were impressed by the cool people with whom I am lucky to build a Jewish life in Madison. It was a pleasure hearing the chanting of Kohelet with many of you online Monday and Thursday evenings, and a delightful treat to feast on s'mores at our Sukkah-side campfire on Wednesday evening, singing with Bruce Wasserstrom. Today is Hosh'anah Rabbah, known for the most complex weekday service of the year, capping off the Season of Repentance and climaxing in an ancient fertility rite. I must say I put more umph than usual into whacking willow branches on the ground, as our prayers for sustenance felt more poignant than ever.

As this letter goes out to you, we have just reconfigured our plans for the next two days of Shabbat and chag, in response to Dane County Executive Joe Parisi's urgent request this week for us to stay safer at home. We exercise our best Jewish and human values by taking seriously our responsibility to preserve life. Sadly, this means that all congregational programming will revert to online-only platforms at least until October 26.

Shabbat and holiday services will return to Zoom for now because we cannot bring together 10 people in our sanctuary. Although we love our new live stream image and audio quality, we chose to return to Zoom so that people can lead parts of our services from their homes, and we can construe a minyan by seeing and hearing participants online. While we will miss streaming from the sanctuary, it will be nice to see each other's faces. Consistent with our practices, there will be no typing chat, but we will be able to segue straight into schmoozing at Kiddush time.

On Sunday morning, we will celebrate the most unusual Simchat Torah in the life of our shul. Instead of dancing with scrolls containing the Five Books of Moses, we will raise up the Torah that we have written ourselves over the past months. Ron Diamond has carved the wooden parts, and the fabric "parchment" will contain the Five Books of BIC. Your submissions were so touching that I have a feeling we will read from our Torah more than once. I am sure that Sunday morning's special event will be a powerful testimony and offering from the heart of our *kahal*.

All of the links you'll need for this Shabbat and Simchat Torah are below. Please note that some of these links are different than those emailed out earlier this week because of the difficult decisions we've made in the past 24 hours.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach, with love,
Rabbi Betsy