

March 20, 2020

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

I think it's fair to assume that hunkering down at home this past week, in light of COVID-19, has been a surreal experience for all of us, and that many of us have experienced a range of emotions that have accentuated the sources of our gratitude as well as our fear. You have all been in my heart throughout these strange days.

Much Torah has been shared among us this week in our twice-daily online gatherings--the Torah of our Biblical text, the Torah of our sages, and the Torah of kindness, compassion, and concern for one another. I extend a Hakarat Hatov--grateful acknowledgement--to our entire staff, Board of Directors, and members who have pitched in to make BIC a source of comfort, strength, and inspiration. I am so grateful to be part of our loving community and I am also grateful to all of the people who are working hard to help all of us endure this trying time.

Shabbat is the climax of our week. It grounds us, restores our humanity, and connects us to our deepest goodness. As we head into our first Shabbat apart from each other. I invite you to make the upcoming 25 hours sacred and distinct from the rest of your week at home. We can benefit tremendously from the ennoblement, the peace, and spiritual refuge Shabbat offers.

This Shabbat, we would have read the "double-*parasha*" of *Vayakhel* and *P'kudei*. This Shabbat also is *Shabbat HaChodesh*, when we announce the new month of *Nissan*, during which *Pesach* falls. Click here for my d'var Torah on *Vayakhel*--which includes a summary of my P'sak (halachic ruling) concerning "virtual minyanim."

Here are some additional thoughts about the *P'kudei* text, which I hope may serve as an inspiration for this Shabbat.

As we begin *Parashat P'kudei*, the work of constructing the portable wilderness Tabernacle that is to be the center of worship and connection in the wilderness has just been completed. The edifice only needs to be lifted up and set down upon the ground for use. Next the Torah says:

"In the first month, of the second year, on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up. *Vayakem Moshe et haMishkan*--And Moses set up the Tabernacle."
(Exodus 40:18)

Moses could not possibly have lifted the Tabernacle by himself; it was much too huge. We understand the verse to mean that Moses *oversaw* the setting up of the Tabernacle, which involved many people's help.

However, in the Midrash, the rabbis imagine that Moshe actually *does* lift the entire Tabernacle by himself. Here is the imagined reading:

God says to Moses, "The people have constructed all the parts of the Mishkan. But I have reserved the final honor, the honor of erecting the Tabernacle, for you."

Moses replies, "Lord, You know that I am not a young man...surely I cannot possibly lift this whole thing by myself."

And God says--profoundly--"Moses, try."

So Moses bends down, takes hold of the boards, and behold, they rise, as if by themselves.

I think this Midrash may come to teach us that when we try to do something important, we are stronger than our own strength. When we try, we can lift up the structures that hold us together as a society, because the Spirit of the Universe will support us. We can do what is difficult.

As individuals, that is what we are doing as we strive to "flatten the curve" of COVID-19. It is hard to isolate ourselves physically, yet we are doing it, and we are coming together on screens, to support each other with our faces and our voices. We are also living out the plain sense of the Biblical text, by being the many hands and voices that hold us together, while our building is closed.

We now face a deeper quiet, in a day that longs to bless us with its gifts. Let us elevate our souls. I urge you to pull away from the bombardment of news and helpful resources on which we fed all week, and turn to more spiritual, sacred, and peaceful ways of speaking, playing, reading, eating, and contemplating. Let's clean up a bit and set a lovely table, if we can. Let's light candles and make Kiddush.

Let us breathe deeply and drink from the stream of the *Ein Sof*--the Eternal Unfolding of Being. Being human is about more than sickness and health. It is about making our

world a place where God's presence can dwell--starting in our own hearts and minds and souls.

Wishing you all a *Shabbat Shalom U'm'vorach*, a Shabbat of peace and blessing. Take good care.

With Love,
Rabbi Betsy

March 27, 2020

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

The past week has brought another jumble of emotions for many of us. A robust minyan celebrated Rosh Chodesh Nissan together on Thursday, and Si gave a beautiful d'var Torah on the Book of *Vayikra* (Leviticus), in light of this week's *parashah*. At the same time, the Virus crept closer to our own realities, as families started feeling stir-crazy and people began receiving news of diagnoses and worse.

We are hopeful and doing our best, and we are also grieving what has already been lost and what may be lost to us in the weeks ahead. The Psalmist articulates the dialectic of the human experience so well. In our twice-daily minyanim and Tuesday's Tea & Torah, many of you explored our liturgy and psalms and with me and found comfort in knowing that the capacity to hold joy and gratitude together with fear and sadness seems to be an enduring human quality we share with our ancestors, and that sharing our experiences with others, even virtually, brings feelings of peace and blessing. We have never had such amazing minyan attendance as over the past 11 days, with people from near and far, and each time, a new face popping in to connect. With this week's addition of Tea & Torah, a book discussion, and *Mishmar* last evening, I feel close and connected to our entire BIC family. If you have not yet joined us on Zoom, I hope you will soon.

Again, Shabbat beckons us toward our deepest and purest truths, and I urge you to pull away from the bombardment of news and advice flowing into our emails from every possible organization. It will do us good to turn to more sacred and peaceful ways of speaking, playing, reading, eating, and contemplating. Once again, let's clean up a bit and set a lovely table, if we can. Let's light candles and make Kiddush. Let us breathe and give our souls the extra quiet space we may need so that we can hear our lives

speak. There is so much wanting to be expressed. Bringing our different feelings to the surface may help us find the calm we need amidst the storm.

This week, we started studying *Parashat Vayikra*. The parashah teaches us that God creates holiness, and asks us to create lives of holiness, by making distinctions and separations. Judaism is an incredibly mindful practice. As we turn toward the island in time Shabbat offers us, I offer you the following poem about how much depth and meaning we can make when we make mindful use of time spent “off-road.” I wrote it together with my friend Ian, as we rode a tour bus with a group of 8th graders, on an Israel trip we were staffing together. I’m thinking of him now, as he is a senior medical doctor at a major hospital; I’m thinking of my daughter Rena, in her sweet little house in Israel. I’m thinking of all of you, my dear BIC family, from whom I draw strength each day in our on-screen sessions.

at the side of the road

at the side of the road
two bright frogs sun themselves
then hop away in different directions.
three tender poppies, late for their season,
stand for attention.
a soldier waits for his bus
weapon slung by his side, mindful
of the love he will make
scrag and scruff stake their territory
whether anyone cares, except
carefree travelers who stop to water them
many things happen here, at the side of the road
while cars and buses race by.

at the top of a hill

In David’s city
an olive tree branch rakes a window
a thin scratch amongst the wine-soaked private whispers
and the guitar notes that greeted his arrival.
gone long, this child warrior,
the tree whips a passionate shalom
to his safe return,
her twisted limbs aching to hold him safe

as she does inside.
here the young live and love for now.

at the bottom of the sky
where dust memory and longing meet
a woman sits on her her planked porch
twisting grey strands from a loose knot
pulling a soft blue scarf close to her chest.
another day gone with its tasks
no dwelling thoughts beyond the heat
but with dusk, dishes cleaned, sheets taken in and folded
she stares over the road and the hill and the city
remembering the best detour she ever took.

A young girl bounds up three flights of stairs
life spinning over her tanned shoulder
calling down to playmates who no longer hear
how high up can they see the fireflies
Summoned indoors for baths and pajamas
storybooks by flashlight under covers
grownups drinking tea with cubes of sugar.

down the street and over the hill
she and he and they all know
life will pour into any open space
the road never led anywhere but back again
the city was always a mix of dreams and chance
and hearts work hardest
at the side of the road.

Wishing you all a *Shabbat Shalom U'm'vorach*, a Shabbat of peace and blessing. Take good care.

With Love,
Rabbi Betsy

[April 13, 2020](#)

Dear Beth Israel Center Family,

Again, Shabbat calls us to cease the routines of our quarantined lives and re-orient to a more soulful way of life, we are grateful for sunshine while we grieve the losses of the past week. We continue to support one another the only and best way possible: through loving connection.

This week, I am front-loading the business of how we will gather via Zoom in the days ahead.

Due to concerns about online vandalism during other congregations' Zoom sessions, we have removed the Zoom links from our website. You will continue to receive all Zoom links through our emails. Please consult your most recent emails from BIC and then hop on screen!

This Shabbat is *Shabbat HaGadol*, "the Great Shabbat." We would have read a special haftarah in shul, and I would have offered inspiration and guidance for Pesach. This year's guidance begins in *Parashat Tzav*, the Torah reading we would have read together tomorrow. There, Aaron and his sons undergo an elaborate set of rituals as part of their ordination to become priests. Following those events, just when we might have thought they would be ready to assume their official duties, the family of almost-priests is sequestered inside the Tabernacle for seven days. It seems that Aaron and his sons must turn their gaze inward before they can be ready to assume the trappings, rituals, and public presence their new office will demand.

The number seven often signifies that a transformation, or rebirth, is taking place. Something new is being created. I wonder if they need to ground themselves in their own sense of self in order to cultivate and integrate humility, attunement, and empowerment so can emerge prepared to accomplish what God calls them to do.

One cannot help but see a connection to our present state. For so many of us, things seemed to be going so well. Many of us were in our most productive time of year and beginning to plan next year's calendar and summer trips -- not to mention weddings, commencement celebrations, b'nei mitzvah, and more. Now, we are all sequestered in our homes riding out the plague of COVID-19 under a cloud of uncertainty. But while we may be looking inward more than usual, our gaze also is pulled outward, into cyberspace, where we are bombarded with unending news and opportunities to Zoom hither and thither. Never before has humanity been at once sequestered and hyper-linked.

The almost-priests have one week to turn their gaze inward. And with the coming of Pesach, we, too, have the opportunity to enter our own week of soulful contemplation, both individually and collectively. This is when we contemplate our individual journeys toward redemption -- what we need to leave behind, how we navigate the wilderness of our own lives, the truths we receive, and the ways of being present in the world toward which we are called, and toward which we strive. Pesach cloaks our contemplation in hope and gratitude for the sacred journey of all human life, symbolized by the Exodus from Egypt.

At our *seder* tables this year, we can say, "This year, we may not travel. Next year, may we be free to travel to Jerusalem -- or anywhere we might want to go. This year, we have a pandemic. Next year, may we be well." But if we choose not to go deeper this year, we will miss a profound opportunity to probe, internalize, and be empowered by the lessons this frightening and tragic time offers us.

We must embrace the opportunity of this moment as we remember that our ancestors were liberated at night, in fear and darkness. They crossed the Sea under dark skies and howling winds for the chance to commit to a life guided by enduring truth and abiding love.

Can really sit cloaked in hope, authentically and responsibly, this Pesach? What will we mean when we sing wistfully of "next year?" What works for me is to acknowledge that we can yet find the Divine and the miraculous in a world filled with suffering and disease that strike regardless of our virtue. Eating matzo is a perfect way to symbolically level the playing field. None of us is so great that we do not fear for our lives and our livelihood. When tales of self-absorption and failed justice pepper the daily news, none of us is so rich that we can say we have attained redemption.

Redemption actually takes a long time. Let us also not forget that the biblical journey toward redemption does not happen all at once. It takes 40 years of transition and transformation to learn how to be free -- and then, there is backsliding, and exile.

The biblical world view and understanding of how God works in the world was different from what we experience today. Our Talmudic sages understood that when they taught, "The world proceeds along its course." Whatever symbiosis between morality and the natural order our Bible portrays belies our lived reality. Our experience of God is different from that of Aaron and his sons.

I invite you to walk the path toward redemption with me, girded by inspiration tethered, however tenuously, to assumptions we trust. I choose to do that “*b’tzelem Elokim,*” “*b’yad hazakah uv’z’roah n’tuyah*” -- in what I believe to be God’s image, with the strength of my own hands and the love of my outstretched arms. Even if our hands must type and our love must come through screens -- however constrained our efforts must be at this time, we will build momentum from what we are learning about the human condition. That is how we will make the goodness and light of the Eternal One shine in our world. I urge us all to unite in the hope of a world in which God’s presence delights to dwell -- starting in our own hearts and with our own hands.

Dear friends, let us make the most of a unique opportunity this year to find ourselves in our personal, Jewish, and human journey toward redemption this year.

Wishing you all a *Shabbat Shalom U’m’vorach*, a *Shabbat* of peace and blessing, and a *chag sameach*.

Please take good care.

With Love,
Rabbi Betsy

April 17, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

The Talmud relates that after the seven days of celebration for the newly constructed Tabernacle, our people enter a new stage in their wanderings. As we concluded our strange, yet hopefully meaningful Pesach yesterday, our People’s ancient story was pinned at the point where the People must figure out how to find the miraculous in the ordinary. God now leads with less of a “mighty hand and outstretched arm” and more of a series of expectations and disappointments, as “real life” sets in. God watches as the Priests take their first, faltering--and some might say disastrous--steps toward religious leadership, and the People’s next step is to determine how to deal with contagious disease.

Change the setting, and the scene is uncannily familiar. Lately, my regular practice of mining our texts for up-to-the-minute insights yields an explosion of relevant points. Here we are, growing weary of our environs, yet needing to discover again the divinity within each of our homes. Further, in the first line of our parashah, the Torah reminds us

of the critical, irreplaceable role our elders play in our lives: “On the eighth day, Moses called Aaron and his sons, *and the elders of Israel*” to undertake the first sacrificial rituals on their new altar. We need the presence, guidance, and counsel of people who bring a broader perspective and have experienced more than we have. As we remain at home, now for at least another month, to protect all people but especially the elderly, that Jewish value comes to life, our awareness heightened to the critical role our elders serve by reminding us who we are and how we are distinct.

Our textual tradition deals little in history per se, but it abounds in memory. Rather than a series of events, we learn of how we and God respond to an ever-changing world, and to each other. Instead of a straightforward plot, we have a development of conscience. In fact, there is no word in biblical Hebrew for “history,” but “Zachor,” the commandment to remember, and the commandment not to forget, repeat over and over in our Bible. We are enjoined to remember our experience and teach our children what it means to put Torah at the center of our lives: “Be careful, and watch yourselves closely, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live; teach them to your children and to their children” (Deut. 4:9).

How do we apply our memory of what makes our community precious and life-giving to the evolving reality of “safer at home?” That is the question that keeps me up at night, thinking about all of you and poring through our texts to understand what each stage of our pandemic demands of us. I am grateful to those of you who have shared with me your pleasure and satisfaction over how we are caring for one another, accompanying and supporting each other through our gatherings and other contacts, with opportunities twice or more six days each week, and greeting Shabbat and welcoming each new week together after a screen-free respite many of us need more than ever. Yet, as we face the likelihood of not gathering in our building until after Shavuot, perhaps we need more, or different, offerings. Strategizing for the past five weeks began seven weeks ago and remains a live conversation. Strategizing for the next five weeks has already begun. If you have thoughts or ideas to share, please do.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach. May this Shabbat help us see the blessings in our lives.

With love,
Rabbi Betsy