

April 24, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

“Quarantine” is the most frequently repeated root word in Parashat Tazria, the first of the double-*parashah* we would have read at shul this Shabbat. Last year, our sanctuary was filled with celebration as we read this *parashah* on the occasion of Caleb Ellenberg’s becoming a bar mitzvah. Much Torah was shared about the *parashah*, whose main focus is the scaly disease called “*tzara’at*,” but the subject of quarantine, despite its prominence in the text, seemed irrelevant, and nobody mentioned it. Under normal circumstances, a *parashah* about a mysterious disease that requires quarantine, disrupts normal life, and seeks a religious response can feel remote. This year, it feels almost like reading news of the pandemic we are experiencing.

The *parashah* teaches that contagious disease must be taken seriously; life cannot be “business as usual” when people are ill and others are at risk. Quarantine demands time, space, and disruption. Counter to this week’s “Open it Up” protestors, who use a different moral calculus, our Torah does not make room for a scenario in which people risk sickness or death for the “greater good.” The proper response to a health crisis is to see the problem as clearly as possible, care for the sick, and ensure safety for the rest. That is why we must take those precautions recommended by medical experts and not risk our lives with unfounded, snake oil suggestions.

Today is the 40th day of our quarantine, marking a significant passage of time in the Jewish mindset. At minyan last evening, we shared reflections on what we have learned in these 40 days. Social science tells us that amidst the human suffering and social crisis produced and augmented a pandemic, such a time also offers unique opportunities for us to develop resiliency and originality. The healthiest approach is to resist the urge to re-order our lives and re-create our usual routines, as if there were no crisis. As horrific as the pandemic is, having claimed over 50,000 American lives and 26 million jobs to date, we will experience less anxiety in the short term, and more resilience and capacity for innovation and creativity for the rest of our lives, if we heed their advice by planning less and making ourselves more present to the disruption and uncertainty we face. That takes work.

The founder of Hasidism, known as the Baal Shem Tov, offers a three-pronged approach to living through encounters with brokenness. Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman describes it in a recent article

(<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/wisdom-for-unwelcome-experiences/>), and I believe his wisdom can help all of us.

The Baal Shem Tov's Three-Pronged Approach to Living Through Brokenness:

1. YIELDING (*"Hachana'ah"*): Although we want to resist disruption, try "letting go of the hopes, expectations, and dreams we had for this moment, and to soften to what is." Our tension and emotional distress will lessen when we learn to yield.
2. DISCERNMENT (*"Havdalah"*): Distinguish fact from fiction, and act wisely. Be curious about the "new normal." Explore experiences and encounters being offered at this unique time. Notice the "sparks of light" in the darkness, let them dance on your fingertips, and share them.
3. SWEETENING (*"Hamta'ah"*): Let yourself be surprised and let yourself grow in new and unexpected ways. Be curious about how you can grow from this time, how new routines and experiences can help you cultivate aspects of yourself that you did not make time for previously. Make nurturing those new capacities part of your practice of being a human being.

Today and tomorrow are Rosh Chodesh Iyyar. May the new month bring progress toward reliable, quick testing and a dependable vaccine. May it bring renewed vigor and courage to health care workers and all who are serving on the front lines so that all people can be fed, sheltered, and healed, and kept safe and supported. May our hearts be open to the teachings of this time, and may we be blessed with the strength and fortitude to use our learning for good.

Shabbat shalom u'm'vorach,
Rabbi Betsy

May 1, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

This past Wednesday, Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice filed an amicus brief with the Wisconsin Supreme Court in support of Governor Evers' Safer at Home order. The brief, which opposes claims made in the suit filed by the Republican leadership seeking to block the Governor's order, was accepted by the Court on Thursday. I am quoted in the brief, which includes letters from 28 of my faith leader colleagues and me. Protestants, Catholics,

Quakers, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists joined together to tell the court that our governor's Safer at Home order has not led to "decreased access to community and religious support," as the suit claims. To the contrary, our letters demonstrate the strength, resiliency, and creativity of communities of faith at this difficult time. Our letters demonstrate that in some ways, we have made religious life more accessible than ever before. You can read my letter below*; the excerpted lines are highlighted.

Also this past week, I was privileged to be interviewed for PorterNotes Podcast, which features unscripted interviews, discussions and social commentary about art, music, culture and history. The host, Alex Porter, asked me many questions about faith. He seemed surprised to learn that unlike my clergy colleagues of other faiths, the Covid-19 pandemic does not test my faith in "a higher power," nor do I believe that God has sent it, or that God is "up in Heaven" making decisions about who will or will not survive. We went on to have an interesting conversation about the ideas Jewish people hold about how we relate to GodGod's role in our lives.

What do those events have in common? They both reinforce a central teaching from this week's Torah reading: The most direct route to sacred connection does not require religious expertise or an untroubled life. We can experience sacred connection no matter what our circumstances. "*K'doshim t'h'yu ki Kadosh Ani,*" the Torah commands--"Be holy, for I am holy (Lev. 19:2). How do we do that? By caring for the poor and the stranger, speaking truthfully, judging impartially, by loving and not hating. The many, everyday laws that make up the "Holiness Code" point to a way of life that makes all the difference in how we experience our relationship with God and others.

You've heard the verse "Do not curse the deaf, nor place a stumbling block before the blind" (Lev. 19:14). It has been widely interpreted since ancient times. The words refer not only to how we treat people with sensory impairments. In the Hebrew, the text admonishes us from "*giving*" a stumbling block to the blind, not simply placing one in front of his feet. "Giving" a stumbling block means putting someone in a position where they might make a misguided choice, or sin inadvertently. For example, we might give information that would lead someone to make a bad purchase, or incite them to act against their principles without pausing to consider the implications. The Jewish value of giving truthful information to the court so that they will not make a misguided judgement based on deceptive rhetoric *springs* from this week's parashah. It was holy work.

Quarantine Week 6 contained events of exquisite sadness in our *kahal* as well as poignant moments of celebration. In words of comfort and support at Zoom connections, meals delivered to doorsteps, sharing stories of Yom HaZikaron and singing Hatikvah

“at” minyan, calling to check in on one another, giving hand-sewn face masks, organizing a massive lasagne project to feed the hungry, thinking together about how we can best meet the needs of our members at this time, the simple gift of honest dialogue, and sharing our best selves in many other ways, we did holy work in the past week.

May this Shabbat bring us the peace and rest we need to remember that the “higher power” lies planted within us all, yearning to be discovered over and over again. May compassion and justice continue to guide our actions. May we always know that no deed is too small to matter, that all giving is an opportunity to receive, and all receiving is also a giving, when the currency is holiness.

Shabbat shalom um'vorach,
Rabbi Betsy

May 8, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

At this point, many of us are beyond “antsy” and experiencing heightened irritability, impatience, and feelings of loss. Instead of our usual mid-May excitement as Spring turns to Summer, we sit in our homes and wonder about summer camp, travel, and High Holy Days, what life will be like, and who we will be six months or a year from now. Existential questions loom large as we weigh possibilities and contingencies in all aspects of our lives.

We know we will get through this. We hope we will emerge wiser and more compassionate, self-aware, and flexible than we were two months ago. Our Beth Israel Center family will continue to find ways to show up for each other with spirit and care. We will continue to be the spiritual and emotional home that grounds us, unites us, and enriches our lives with joy, purpose, and meaning. Meanwhile, here we are.

When our ancestors cry out in fear and distress, Moshe compares himself to a mother longing to nurse a child but lacking milk (Numbers 11:12). He wants to hold his people close, to comfort and nourish them. It is a relatable image for us.

Our sages expound that the Torah is like milk, filling us with God’s love: “Just as breasts are full of milk, so too Moshe and Aharon fill up Israel from the Torah” (Shir HaShirim

Rabbah 4:5). That may be a lovely analogy, but I know I'm not alone in craving *actual* comfort food. I want bread, pudding, mashed potatoes, chocolate chip cookies, soup, and hot cocoa. In short, I want the foods given to me as a youngster, which meant "I love you, I am here for you, and I will always care for you" when I was very young and which bring back those safe and warm feelings even now.

Parashat Emor, this week's Torah reading, understands. While the *parashah* mostly comprises a "users manual" for the *Kohanim* (Priests), "food" and "eating" appear as two of its most frequently occurring motifs, calling us to respond to a subtext with which we can all identify.

In our *parashah*, sacrificial offerings serve as God's "food," even as the text makes clear that God does not consume them in a nutritive way. The *Kohanim* eat the portions that are not burned completely; thus, the offerings of the community become not only God's food, but the Priests' as well. Some offerings, like grain, are eaten in their entirety by the *Kohanim*, who literally imbibe the circumstances and intentions that inspired their bringing. A symbiotic spiritual-emotional "feeding" takes place between God, the *Kohanim*, and every individual who seeks connection through those rituals. The *Kohanim* must be fit to eat the sacred offerings, whose holiness derives from connective intention, not only between God and people, but also between human beings.

Today, we are at once the priests and laypeople, those who offer and those who elevate. We serve these roles in many ways, including the giving and sharing of food. Martin Buber wrote, "One eats in holiness, tastes the taste of food in holiness, and the table becomes an altar. One works in holiness; and he raises up the sparks that hide themselves in all tools. One walks in holiness across the fields, and the soft songs of all herbs which they voice to God, enter into the song of our soul. One drinks in holiness to each other with one's companions, and it is as if they read together in the Torah. One dances the roundelay in holiness, and a brightness shines over the gathering." Food means love, care, family, identity, memory, intention. That is what holiness feels like.

During the past week, many of us heard about the oatmeal-banana-chocolate chunk cookies Mona Schwab z"l would bake for her family. My own mother sent cookie care packages to each of my children. Stores cannot keep flour and yeast on the shelves. How we yearn and need to give love, that precious gift that often takes the form of cookies and other baked treats.

This evening we will have two opportunities to eat in holiness and make our table an altar. At our virtual "potluck" dinner following Kabbalat Shabbat services, we will share

the gift of our presence with each other. Showing up to see and be seen in this way is comfort food, and it elevates our spirits with its implicit message: “I care about you; you complete my spiritual world, and I want to experience something delicious together.” We will close our Zoom session after dinner to let the spirit of Shabbat fill our homes. Candle light, *Kiddush*, *challah*, and good memories will connect us back to the *Kohanim* who initiated those rituals on an altar in a desert long ago.

I wish you all a *Shabbat shalom um'vorach*. And, if you haven't given yourself something yummy lately, I hope you will, soon.

Rabbi Betsy

May 15, 2020

Dear BIC Family,

This week, I rolled our weekday minyan Torah scroll for Alex Dolin to read in celebration of becoming a bar mitzvah. It was set in Sh'mot (Exodus), at the Revelation at Sinai. I scrolled through the end of Sh'mot, all the way to the last column of Vayikra (Leviticus), where Alex chanted beautifully the final three verses he had prepared to be read in our sanctuary tomorrow.

Since then I have not been able to get the words “Chazak chazak, V'nitchazek,” “Strong, Strong, and Let us Strengthen Ourselves” out of my head. We rise and sing those words together in shul upon the completion of every book of Torah. Since we have been “safer at home,” a whole book of Torah has gone unread and uncelebrated. We have lost a great deal in this pandemic, and more will yet be lost.

And yet we hope for strength, believing we will emerge from the pandemic wiser, and more compassionate, creative and resilient than we were before.

We missed our communal celebration of Lag B'Omer this year, but Lag B'Omer memories were shared, and legends recounted, in some of our Zoom encounters this past week. One of those legends concerns Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (“Rashbi”), the Kabbalist and author of the *Zohar*, whose *yahrzeit* falls on Lag B'Omer.

This is the story: After Rashbi speaks against the Roman Empire, the Roman authorities order his execution. Rashbi and his son, the sage Rabbi Elazar, hide in a cave for 12 years, where they engage in deep Torah learning all day, buried up to their necks in sand. God provides a carob tree a stream for sustenance, and Rashbi masters the Torah's deepest secrets.

Finally, it is safe to emerge. As they begin walking to their village, they see farmers working the land, the sight of which infuriates them. It pains them to see Jewish people engaged in worldly matters. Their angry gaze burns with fire so powerful that it blazes and scorches the land. They burn everything in sight!

God is not pleased and lashes out at them: “Have you come to destroy my world?! Go back to your cave!” So they go back and bury themselves in their cave for another year, only emerging when God calls them back to the real world. This time, Rashbi has a different outlook, and he persuades his son that they can live in a world where people will find their own ways to balance the sacred and the ordinary. They will find a small audience for their lofty teachings, and that will suffice.

But they are still nervous about whether they can live in such a world, until their first Friday afternoon out of hiding, when they encounter an elderly man carrying two bundles of fragrant myrtle to his home for Shabbat. The two rabbis wonder why the man needs so much myrtle, so they ask: “Isn’t one bundle enough?” The man tells them that one bundle is for the *mitzvah* to “remember the Sabbath day” (Exodus 20:8), and the other is for the *mitzvah* to “observe the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:12). The man believes that those two formulations reveal two different ways to make Shabbat holy, and he welcomed both of them. Rashbi and Rabbi Elazar thus learn that each Jew, whether scholarly or not, can find their way to make Torah a life-giving treasure.

So, what can we learn from this legend of Rashbi and his son? I offer three suggestions:

1. It is good for us to build community from a range of perspectives and approaches to Torah. Our differences make us vibrant and accessible.
2. We can grow our capacity to love and admire others. Rashbi became known for his love and respect for everyone in his community. He taught: “Had a single Jew been missing at Mount Sinai, the Divine revelation could not have occurred” (Devarim Rabbah 7:8).
3. The Hebrew word “*l’hishtablel*” means “to snail”--literally, to crawl into a cave and wait for trouble to pass. Human beings are not created to be like snails. Created in God’s image, we must bring care, love, and persistent engagement to our world, especially now. We are called to repair our world, just as we are called to protect life and avoid any possibility of adding risk to anyone’s physical health. We should not hide from the challenges of living in dangerous and uncertain times; instead, we must face reality and work to redeem the brokenness before us.

I look forward to living into those lessons in the weeks ahead, with new offerings as our needs evolve. From baking and delivering more lasagne than we imagined possible, to our outstanding plans for an invigorating, thoughtful, and inspiring Shavuot; from new

topics in our weekly classes, to new offerings soon to be unveiled, I am so proud and grateful for our dynamic and intentional kahal.

For now, it is time, once again, for us to find spiritual repose in sacred time, in the incredibly lush and colorful Spring we are so blessed to receive at this time in Madison.

Wishing you all a *Shabbat shalom um'vorakh*--a Shabbat of peace and blessing,
Rabbi Betsy