

Last week in our Jewish Journeys program, our pre-b'nai mitzvah class--we had our session on theology-God. I always find this to be an interesting class it brings up so many of the complicated ideas and the emotional baggage that the students hold about God. We begin with an exercise where the students write down anonymously what they believe God is and what God is not, and we discuss the basic concept of belief and theology. We looked at some video clips from youtube, and I try my best to steer the students to see that while there is plenty to not believe in, plenty of tired theological words and concepts that don't connect--God as judge, creator as a man with a beard, we can also believe in a more open, less supernatural kind of God. Then I give the students a list, a long list of over 100 names and concepts of God found in the Torah and biblical texts: The Most High, Guardian of Israel, The Name, God of Truth, King of Kings, Master of All, Makom, The Place. I then ask the students to find one or two names that they really dislike and challenge them to find at least one that fits best their personal theology. They spend a few minutes, and usually come up with the ones that are more mysterious--the rock, mentor, peace, the good one, the guide, the cloud. Each is mystery, not easy to explain, not easy to say "I believe" or "I don't believe". Instead these ideas demand relationship, and they demand action.

This week we also encounter some mysterious theology...

As we reach the end of the book of Exodus this week, we find the Israelites in a difficult place in their journey--with the years of slavery and wandering not too far behind them, and the journey ahead all but a mystery. The people have worked hard to build the Mishkan, the tabernacle, the dwelling place for God, and it has finally been completed. A detailed accounting of everything in the Mishkan is given, all of the gold, silver and copper, followed by a description of the eight Priestly garments. Moses blesses the people and then

proceeds to put all of the pieces in the correct places—the walls, the screens and tables. He then anoints the Mishkan with oil, and consecrates Aaron and his sons by putting the priestly garments on them and also anointing them with oil. Everything is in place, the proper blessings have been said, and Moses and the Israelites seem set to continue on in their journey. And then in the final lines of the entire book of Exodus, we read something quite powerful, filled with an emotional strength and mystery which more than makes up for the long lists preceding it. We read: “When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the presence of God filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of God filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys, but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the tabernacle a cloud of God rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys (Exodus 36:33-38) And with those words, the book of Exodus, the incredible story of Moses, and the journey of the Jewish people from slavery to freedom concludes. Just as the Jewish people are set to continue on their journey, the cloud settles in.

The Israelites have managed to build a dwelling place for God following all of the rules which were given to them—freely sharing not only the very physical parts of their lives, their jewelry, their fabrics and their money, but also their hopes and desires to build a community that will stay together as they move forward on their journey. They want, and they need to know that everything will hold together and work out, beyond the very physical walls of the mishkan that have built. The cloud provides that sense of comfort and safety—just like the clouds hovering over a bridge—which allows the people to live in the moment—to forget the years of slavery, the hunger and thirst of their desert wandering, their anger at Moses and their confusion about God, and if

only for a moment at a time, gather together as one people with one common goal. The cloud settles in.

In fact, a cloud is also a very telling metaphor for the experience of being in a Jewish community, of both the strength and sometime the disorientation which it brings. We, like the makers of the Mishkan, come together to create a *kehillah kedosha*, a holy community, bringing the important parts of ourselves, our stories, our personalities, our wisdom providing structure to the metaphorical walls of our Mishkan. We learn from each other and from those who came before us. We argue, and disagree, celebrate, mourn, grow, and change. And hopefully, we can rest easily knowing that we have created something holy.

But just like the Mishkan, sometimes we need to take some of the pieces apart and move ahead on our journeys. Life brings us joys and disappointments, changes and growth and sometimes this forces us to leave the “camp” behind for some time, or move ahead to chart our own path. This can leave us disoriented, unable to see, and unprepared for what might lie ahead. The cloud of God’s presence symbolizes the faith that we must have in the unknown, that if we have built the sanctuary of our community with all of the best materials then we trust that we will be led down the path of more learning, openness, and holiness.

As tradition tells us, the entire process of making the Mishkan mirrors in both process and language the story in Genesis of God creating the world. In Genesis, God created the world as a place for people, and with the Mishkan now complete, people have made a place for God. Some commentators such as the Italian Bible Scholar Umberto Cassuto expanded on the meaning of the Mishkan saying that we can also think of it as “a portable Mt Sinai which can be transported from place to place showing the divine revelation was not unique, but a recurring phenomena”. So the Mishkan, this portable sanctuary, built from the donations and hard work of all the people becomes much more

than a building. It represents both the history of the people, and gives us insight into their future relationship with God. The God of the Israelites was not just the creator of the world, or the God who revealed the Torah to Moses. With the Mishkan, the people knew that God would always be with them, and revelation would never end.

And here, the cloud—the presence of God—lets the people know that God is with them. When the Mishkan is resting, the cloud is resting, but as the text says, when the cloud moves, then the people are told to move on too—to continue on their journeys.

But if we look carefully at what the text says about these journeys *bechol mas'ehem*, all the journeys of the Israelites, then we can also learn something quite powerful about our own personal journeys, the journeys of our communities, and what we have to do to begin them. Rashi, the great medieval commentator, points out that the word *journey* is mentioned twice. In the first instance, the cloud, the presence of God lifts and leads the people on their journey. But in the second case, it says that the cloud was over the mishkan as the people, the community, set camp and rested—and that this was also a *massa*, a journey. Rashi says:

*"A place where they encamped is also called massa, "a journey" . . . Because from the place of encampment they always set out again on a new journey, therefore they are all called "journeys."*

So in essence, as we near the end of the great journey of the Exodus, a story beginning with a little boy in the Nile in Egypt, and ending with the completed Mishkan in the desert, we are told that a journey just as powerful, filled with just as much of God's presence, in the place where the journey starts, in the place of rest. We don't need to go through 40 years of wandering, or years of slavery to have a journey—we just need to have a beginning. And like driving a car over a fog covered bridge—even when we are at rest, when we have settled into our home and our community and it may not seem like we are

moving at all—we know that in this too, we can find a journey. So be prepared, because in the normalcy and challenges of daily life, we should always be ready for extraordinary experiences, for great learning and expanded connections. If we are ready, the presence of God may even settle in.