

Better Together: Building From Our Roots
Rabbi Lisa Gelber - Congregation Habonim
October 14, 2018/5 Heshvan 5779

ויאמר הי אל אברם
The Holy One said to Avram
לך לך
You, go!
מארצך
From your land
וממולדתך
From the place you were born
ומבית אביך
And from your father's house
אל הארץ אשר אראך
To the land I will show you.

My daughter Zahara and I immersed in these opening words of this week's *parasha* this summer as she began her study of Humash - the 5 books of our Torah. Notable is the intense personal relationship that must underlie the expectation of such an encounter. Throw off your connections and go. Trust me as you leave everything behind. And from a force we are not aware Avram even knew. I asked Zahara, *isn't this strange? Does Gd talk to you?* My child looked at me incredulously and exclaimed, *Gd talks to everyone, Mommy.*

Gd talks to everyone. In this *parasha* and this world, I believe Gd asks one critical question, **Who are you?** Take a moment to ask yourself this question. Who are you? What are the core values on which you stand? These opening words of *lech l'cha* are all about who we are. --- ---- *cha cha cha*. This grammatical construction calls to us, you, you, you. Who are you?!

Who we are is influenced by the narrative around how we come to be. Congregation Habonim was founded in NYC on November 9, 1939, one year to the day after Kristallnacht. *Rabbi Hugo Hahn of Essen, Germany joined a number of German refugees to create a Jewish home where they could pray together with the liturgy of their origins, learn together in the best traditions of the German-Jewish thinkers and teachers and provide a welcoming setting for adults and young people who had left everything and often everyone they knew* (Susan Grant, Habonim). Refuge; Safety of Mind, Body and Spirit; Community; Tradition; Connection to the Holy One through Learning, Inquiry, Reflection and Prayer. All at the core of who we are here at Habonim. Care for one another, stretching our minds, nurturing space for people of all ages, creating family. These values and practices are the essence of who we are at Habonim.

The identity that accompanies our name - Habonim - The Builders reminds us of the responsibility to plant and sow, to build in depth and in breadth. For this, we need courage and commitment. The wisdom to rediscover who we are. In his response to the Holy One, Avram did just this. Clearing away distractions, he got up and moved. Somehow, his ears and his heart were attuned to the call towards his most genuine self. S'fat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger) understands the Holy One's call to Avram towards a place I will show you as a place where he will become visible. Seen. Appreciated for who and how he is. Several months ago, our Membership Committee engaged in conversation about who we are as community. From that emerged the following - *Unpretentious. Joyful. A place where people are seen and heard. A place where you can be your authentic self.* Like Avram, we hear the call towards a place that makes room for all our blessings and idiosyncracies. We are a place for humanity.

I believe on this day - October 14, 2018/5 Heshvan 5779 - as on everyday, it is no small commitment to make room for humanity. Many have heard from me about the letter our beloved Dail Stolow unearthed from Rabbi Manfred Swarsensky whose Berlin synagogue was destroyed on Kristallnacht. His journey to and in the US is one of multiple connections to our congregation of origin. His words, penned to Rabbi Hugo Hahn in March of 1952 bear repeating today,

The fact that men and women of our background and experience are building Temples in this fine and fair land of ours, is by itself testimony to the indomitable and inexhaustible vitality of our age-old faith, tested again and again in the crucible of time...It is good that Jews build Temples of Worship...In these turbulent days of the Mid-Twentieth Century when the physical and emotional disturbances in human society threaten to throw all of us into an abyss of fear, fatigue and futility, the Temples built to the glory of the divine Architect and to the service of His children stand unshaken like the everlasting hills beckoning the weary wanderer with the glad assurance of Faith and Hope. The modern Jew needs more than ever a peace and quiet amidst the rising fever and tumult of the world, a respite from the clamorous demands of his own material interests, a timeless sanctuary where he can lose himself in order to find himself, a powerhouse where spirit is realized and energized that he may go out into the world to fight the good fight of the Lord against the evils that perennially frustrate human life and turn the good earth into a vial of tears.

These words are as much for today as they were for the groundbreaking of our original building. We need respite for our minds, bodies and spirits, a place to practice the important values of *hesed* - lovingkindness and *tzedakah* - justice and repair of equilibrium in our world. We need the strength that comes from community, from someone noticing when you are present and when you are not, from the invitation to share your story and take your turn at leadership, from the chance for young and old to serve as role models and mentors whether that means blowing shofar for kids younger than oneself, forming hamentaschen into perfect and imperfect triangles, sharing one's

story of escape and journey from Germany with the lens of openness and blessing for the first time, learning weekday melodies for our Sunday morning prayer service, gathering a diverse group of community members to conceptualize, consult, plan, promote and implement Adult Education initiatives, partnering with someone to learn to serve as *gabbai* (cruise director for the prayer service) or teach someone to throw a ball. The synagogue is to be a mirror, a place that reflects our outsides and our insides, a place that honors who we are as individuals who appreciate that every act has the potential to raise up the holiness in the world in which we live, the world that affects how we are with ourselves, with one another and with the Holy One. As the Director of the sleep-away camp my daughter attends shared with parents at our orientation session, *It is goodness here; it's kindness; it's the way we want the world to be.* I say the same for Habonim. **It must be goodness here. Kindness. The way we want the world to be.**

It is no accident that Gd's question of self-understanding and awareness is couched in the call to go, to move, to travel and journey away from what we understand as the safety of one's past. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev asserts that *lech l'cha* - and the words that follow offer a fundamental lesson.

לכל מקום שאדם הולך הוא הולך לשורשו

Wherever you go, you are going to your rooted place. The source of one's being. The core and essence of who one is.

כי בוודאי באותו המקום יש שרשו וצריך להעלות אותן הנצוצות

Of course, it is from that essential self, the core that holds you upright as a human created in Gd's image that you must raise up the sparks of your unique self. Before you go anywhere, dig deep because building a world of truth and justice and peace demands the integrity that comes from knowing the genuine place from which the blessings of imagination and fortitude emerge.

The text concludes, *this what the Holy One meant by lech l'cha - You go - לבדך - by yourself - to your source and raise up holy sparks* of energy, wisdom, courage, ingenuity, grace, kindness and entrepreneurial spirit. Call them up and do something with them.

לזה אמר לך לך. לבדך. לשורשך להעלות אותן הנצוצות

We cannot underestimate the value of knowing oneself - as a person and community - as a critical source for valuing the individual, understanding what it means to be in relationship with others and forging a relationship with the Divine.

I have studied this text of Kedushat Levi many times. This time, when I sat down to rediscover its message, I misread לבדך - changing out a *resh* for the *dalet*,

transforming the word into *l'varech* - to bless. It is the Divine within on which we must call to send forth those sparks, sharing the soul of our being as blessing. I am deeply grateful for the privilege of serving this community as rabbi and spiritual leader. Every day, I stretch beyond, motivated by our questions, our commitments and our quest to illuminate the world. Our work together is daily blessing.

Today, I am particularly grateful to Amy Foster and the entire Installation Committee - Caitlin Gurwin, Danielle Kaufman, Laurie Mendik and Steve Kaplan - who worked tirelessly to conceptualize, craft, promote and bring this day to fruition. To Rich Verner, President of Congregation Habonim who honors the past and leads with an eye towards innovation. To Neil Goldstein, Immediate Past President who always tells me the truth and ended many of our meetings saying *Rabbi, We must set a date for your Installation*. To the Search Committee, thoughtfully led by Janet Cord, Michael Harwayne and Tony Robins. To our dedicated staff, Cantor Bruce Halev, my Bimah Partner in Crime; Executive Director, Laura Lewis; Director of Religious School and Youth and Family Programming, Rina Cohen Schwarz; Nursery School Director, Tina Lobel and Assistant Director, Ann Obsatz; Nursery School Administrative Coordinator, Michael Berry; Dedicated Office Staff, Malkie Grozalsky, Adina Rifkin, and Louise Rode; our indomitable Maintenance Team, Matvey Khazanov, Jesus Gutierrez, Neil Pascuale, Petr Progrebnyak; Dedicated Members of our Executive Board and Board of Directors (all of these individuals are listed in the program; reach out to them following the Installation).

To those in our community who attend on Shabbat and those who do not. Our families with children in our schools, in other schools and those without children - of all ages. Our children who find their way into this building through so many avenues and make me smile and laugh with their artwork and expressions. Those who light up my day when I see you running in the park, walking on the street, in the subway, on the bus, in Starbucks, Fairway, Whole Foods and the butcher, the nail salon, the airport, the Heschel Lobby, places far from Habonim, here at shul, in my email inbox or on the phone. I am grateful for your counsel, imagination, presence, boundless energy, hours of dedicated time and effort to nurture and grow our community at Habonim.

To my colleagues, friends, family and friends as if family - here in body and those here only in spirit today - my gratitude for walking this journey with me in support and in challenge, as my call towards inspirational leadership that reverberates with integrity and authenticity leads the way. To my mother who is here and my father whose voice I hear whenever I write anything. And to Zahara, my Torah muse, who mostly understands giving myself over to community and work that grows love and knowledge with the potential for reshaping a broken world. You are here early and leave late. You greet and organize, set up and clean up. Friend to those of all ages, your radiant smile, wit, wisdom and imagination are the most amazing *brachot*. As much as the title rabbi sits at the core of my being, my most important title will always be ima, your mommy.

A few years after Zahara came into my life, I said to my dear colleague, mentor and friend, the beloved Rabbi Rachel Cowan (z'l), If only I had known I would eventually hit the jackpot and become a mom, life would have been so much easier (as if becoming one of the first 60 Conservative Women Rabbis was a piece of cake). To which Rachel looked at me and in her inimitable way of cutting right to the heart of the matter said, *Then you would not be here*. Every moment is an opportunity to live and choose with intention. Every day offers a chance to learn from one another and build for the future in this moment.

Gd talks to all of us. May we each in time hear the call from deep within and respond with wise and righteous action.

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