

TEMPLE BETH EL – FIRST SHABBAT

VAYAKHEL

It is wonderful to be back at Temple Beth El,
and to see so many familiar and welcoming faces.

I want to acknowledge that this congregation has been through
some very traumatic times lately.

I know there is pain, and sadness, and anger
that many of you have been, and are still experiencing.

Rabbi Yitzi served you very well in many ways.

He was a great teacher – intelligent, creative, dynamic.

Wherever you stood on the subject of his tenure,
his departure is a loss and must be mourned.

And mourning takes time, which I believe you must give yourselves.

I hope I will be able to help you in this process.

But I also want to look to the future –

to a time of recovery and healing –

to a time when we can all contemplate a healthy, dynamic, and
unified congregation.

And for inspiration, we need look no further than this week's Torah portion, Vayakhel.

Things often work in mysterious and wonderful ways.

This week's Torah portion couldn't be more appropriate to the situation we find ourselves in at Temple Beth El.

A few weeks ago in the Torah, you may remember that God gave very detailed instructions to the Israelites to build the mishkan, the moveable Tabernacle that they carry with them in the desert.

The modern-day mishkan is, of course, the synagogue, a place of holiness, a home for the presence of God.

In last week's Torah portion, an unfortunate incident occurs – the incident of the Golden Calf.

Impatient and concerned that Moses has been up on the mountain with God for an extended period of time and may never return, the Israelites ask Aaron to make them a visible God they can worship.

The result, of course, is that Moses and God become very angry.

Now, what is significant in this story is that this episode causes a great deal of dissension, divisiveness, and disillusionment in the community. And most problematic of all, God's presence almost disappears from within the midst of the Israelites.

But the key is almost, because God does not abandon them. God forgives them and achieves a reconciliation with the Israelite community.

The community is not only able to move forward, they are able to do so together.

This week's parasha begins with Moses assembling the whole Israelite community:

Vayakhel Moshe et-kol adat b'nei Yisrael ...

By calling everyone together, Moses restores the sense of unity and shared purpose that had existed prior to the Golden Calf.

The Israelites will now proceed to build the mishkan together.

For, indeed, building a place of holiness can only be done with the energy and resources of every single Israelite joined together for this noble goal.

The next two Torah portions will review in detail,
the work each and every one of them will contribute
to make this dwelling-place of God a reality.

I think this is such an important lesson for us here at Temple Beth El.

We can get off track in our holy work, in our divine purpose,
but we can return to it, creating a beautiful enterprise
like the mishkan, creating a warm, loving community
that can see us through the hard times.

Because we are resilient, we have inner resources,
and most importantly, we have each other.

Now interestingly, before they begin to build the mishkan,
Moses reminds the Israelites of the laws of Shabbat.

Why would he do this?

What does Shabbat have to do with construction?

Perhaps it is because Shabbat connects to
our most important values,
to the people who are most precious to us.

And that is just the mindset that is needed
for the community to pull together.

In explaining the laws of Shabbat,
the Torah even says that those who do not observe the Shabbat
will be killed. I think we are meant to take this on a metaphorical
level. Because if we do not take the time to get in touch
with our deep spirituality, with our connection to God,
we will experience the death of our soul.

We need this time to draw on our higher selves.

Indeed, once Moses enumerates these laws of Shabbat,
he asks those whose heart so moves them
to bring donations of materials.

The whole community willingly and happily
brings elaborate offerings of fine linen and threads,
of gold and silver and copper,
of dolphin skins and incense.

In fact, they are so enthusiastic and generous,
that they actually bring too much!

-- freely contributing their most precious possessions and their skills -
- and Moses has to stop them.

There are striking parallels between the building of the mishkan and the account of the world's creation in Genesis.

Just as God made the universe,
so the Israelites construct the mishkan.

Just as the universe began with an act of creation,
so too Jewish history, the history of our people,
begins with an act of creation.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out,
the effect is to suggest that making the mishkan was,
for the Israelites, what creating the universe was for God.
Yet, as he notes, the disparity is extraordinary.

The creation of the universe takes a mere 34 verses.

The making of the mishkan takes hundreds of verses –
more than ten times as long. Why?

Given that the length of any passage in the Torah
is a guide to the significance it attaches to an episode or law,
why devote so much time and space to the Tabernacle?

Well, as he explains, it is not difficult for an infinite,
omnipotent creator to make a home for humanity.

What is difficult is for human beings, in their finitude and vulnerability, to make a home for God. Yet that is the purpose, not only of the mishkan in particular but of the Torah as a whole.

So what guidance can we take from this parasha to help us with the trying times you have all been experiencing at Temple Beth El over the past several months?

I think the parasha demonstrates beautifully how a community can move from brokenness to healing.

How a community can come together, how its members can contribute to each other for the greater good, how a community can recover its sense of holiness.

The Israelites turned away from God in the desert and built the Golden Calf out of fear and uncertainty.

Moses, their leader, tarried on the mountaintop and, not sure if he will ever return, they slide back to their old ways, the ways of idolatry.

The result is that Moses and God are angry and dismayed.

God even needs to give Godself a “time out” realizing that, otherwise, God’s people will be destroyed.

But God ultimately understands where the Israelites are coming from and God forgives them, and reconciles with them, giving them the chance to try again.

We human beings are flawed, all of us.

We stumble and fall, but we also pull ourselves up and bounce back.

I believe that the Beth El community has the resources to recover too.

We can all come together to create a place of holiness –

a place where we respect one another,

where we recognize the divine within each other,

where we can all thrive and where we can bring out the best

in one another.

So how do we recover from a sense of betrayal, from dissension, from hurt, and from anger?

With time, patience, understanding, hope and faith.

Let's give ourselves the opportunity to mourn –

but let's also look toward the future.

Let's imagine the Temple community we would like to see,

and let's build it together, step by step.

I would like to close with a prayer written by Ruth Brin
which appears in the new Women's Torah Commentary.
It's called: They Build the Tabernacle.

To devotion God sets no limits,
and to dedication of the spirit
God sets no bounds;

But great quantities of tribute God did not demand,
and the people were restrained from bringing
too much gold for the Tabernacle.

Though the Temples of Solomon and Herod
were far more costly,
it is written that the Divine Presence was found
more constantly in the humbler structure.

To dedicate the spirit to God is more difficult
than to give money,
to devote the whole heart to God

is more difficult than bringing gifts.

Not because of the gold on the walls
does the light of the sanctuary shine forth,
but because of the spirit within.

Those who worship carry away with them
more than they bring
for they find there the light to illumine
their lives.