

Farewell to Taraval

Friday Night Sermon
Am Tikvah – May 19TH, 2023
Parshat Bamidbar

Tonight we begin our farewell to Taraval. This building, originally built as a nightclub in 1945, has been transformed in many ways by Congregation B'nai Emunah. Of course, back then, it was built, as buildings are, with wood and stone and steel. When B'nai Emunah took over the Sand Dune Bar in 1976, you infused it with Torah, avodah and gemilut chasadim.

We all know that a synagogue goes by three names: beit Knesset (a house of gathering), beit midrash (a house of learning), and beit tefilah (a house of worship). The scholar Lee Shai Weissbach writes that a synagogue is also a *mivneh simli* – a symbolic structure fraught with meaning. “That is, a synagogue building often acts as a concrete representation of the character and condition of the Jewish community it serves.”

While tonight is more about this building and not about CBE as such, we would be remiss not to acknowledge B'nai Emunah's roots, as past president Ken Mitchell wrote, “as a congregation that comprised German-speaking refugees and survivors from Europe and the Diaspora.” Most had come to San Francisco via China and especially via Shanghai. They were led by Rabbi George Kantorowsky and these refugees founded B'nai Emunah during Hanukkah 1949.

Even before B'nai Emunah moved in, these walls had seen a lot. Jerry Garcia grooving out here in the 1970s. The 1959 police raid on tower for bookmaking. Early on in B'nai Emunah's life here, Passover 1977, this building was attacked by pro-Nazi sympathizers retaliating for a Jewish attack on the Rudolf Hess bookstore located directly across the street. The Nazis smashed five stained-glass windows of this synagogue. The news of the Nazi assault on this building

triggered an outpouring of donations for the restoration of the windows. So much so that a second set of stained-glass windows was commissioned for the opposite wall by Horace Kadoorie. They were installed in 1980. Over the years this building has seen a lot: classroom renovations, office renovations, painting, and repainting.

What else have these walls seen besides Jerry Garcia and horrific vandalism? The tentative prayers of children learning their alef-bet. The cracking voices of bar and bat mitzvah students chanting Torah. The heart-breaking sobbing of men and women reciting kaddish for their departed for the first time. The joyous chair dance at the simchah of a wedding. How many Shabbat onegs? How many Shabbat morning kiddushes? How many Yom Kippur break-fasts?

How many Board meetings? Committee meetings? How much rabbinic pastoral care? How many classes? How much learning? How much Torah?

In this week's Torah portion, the Israelites arrange themselves in a protective encampment around the Mishkan the Tabernacle which housed God's presence. This military-style deployment served as a temporary home for the Israelites as they made their way to their permanent home in Eretz Yisrael. Though as we saw in last week's Torah portion, the Land of Israel never really 'belonged' to the Israelites; it belonged to God. Nonetheless, for the Israelites and the for the Jewish people through the millennia, the Land of Israel was cherished as our home. No matter that many most Jewish families hadn't lived there in hundreds or thousands of years, in the Jewish psyche the Land of Israel was and is home.

You finish the phrase; "Home is where..."

The heart is
You hang your hat
You make it
Hugs live

Your soul can rest
You are at peace with yourself
Where your dog is

We Jews might say: Home is where you can do mitzvot. This Taraval building has been home to Cong B'nai Emunah because this the place where you have done mitzvot. This is the place where you have felt most Jewish. This is the place where you could be your most authentic Jewish self.

Please come to the Open House on Sunday afternoon at 1:00. We will help you make a video farewell to this building. We will be taking photographs for a permanent record of this good bye. Some long-timers will speak, the legacy B'nai Emunah choir will sing.

I close with this point: a building is not a synagogue. A building houses a synagogue. Though we say goodbye to this building at 3595 Taraval, Congregation B'nai Emunah lives on in Am Tikvah, just as Beth Israel Judea lives on in Am Tikvah. The shared values, the shared loved of Judaism and Hebrew and Israel continue on in Am Tikvah, and the shared love of the Jewish people continue on in this new synagogue community. To this building which has absorbed so much holiness because of the sanctity that you brought to it, to this building we say: thank you for nearly a half-a century of sheltering us. We love you for it. Your job is done.

Shabbat shalom