

EMERITUS SERMON

First and foremost, Shabbat Shalom; and, somewhat belatedly, Chag Shavuot Same'ach.

What a wonderful privilege it is to be on this Bima again as you ask me to assume the mantle of Rabbi Emeritus for Congregation B'nai Chaim. I am deeply appreciative of this honor and thank Rabbi Severine, President Buddy and the Board for extending me this title.

As some of you know, we worked together for over a decade to build this congregation, to buy, fund, and sanctify this building, to buy a sefer torah, to adorn our sacred scrolls and to restore to full *kashrut* the text of the scroll that was originally here when I arrived. We bought siddureem and the carts to put them on. We secured a goodly number of Plaut Torahs which both enable us to study Torah text with Reform commentary and cite them as *the* reference, par excellence, for both children and adults.

It is fitting that this service and these concomitant reminiscences take place on Shavuot. No more powerful event than *matan torah*, the giving of the law at Mt Sinai, takes place in the Jewish calendar. All of the excitement, all the significance reflected, as it were, in the natural phenomena...the lightning flashing

and the thunder concussing around the summit of the mountain, the voice of God rolling and roiling from the mountain top, the people trembling in awe and wonder; all these and more is encompassed on this day in our collective, Jewish memory. But the outer trappings of light and sound, the clouds and other weather events notwithstanding, the true essence of the moment was the revelation of God's law. Torah was at the core of that day, as it is and must be at the center of our lives if we are to call ourselves, dedicated Jews.

Even with the mountain top revelatory experience, we know that cannot live at Sinai forever. There is the mundane business of living life and of running a congregation that has to be dealt with. During my tenure as your rabbi, we, like all other congregations, had our issues. Our building was a constant source of challenge given its location at the low point of the neighborhood into which all excess water, like those of the Nile, seemed to flow. We too often compared ourselves to the generation of Noah, repeatedly suffering floods that caused no small water damage and threatened the very enterprise. Until we, by necessity, by-passed the officials of Jefferson County and built what I lovingly called, "The Moat," we remained under the constant threat of destructive inundation.

Flooding wasn't the only issue we tackled, by far. Like God, Moses, and the desert bound Israelites; we began the process of establishing operating rules and procedures so that we could enjoy the peace that structure and stricture can bring to any organization. At many Board meetings, I would very often argue for some approach, taking stands that drew upon what I had learned both from my near quarter century of being a military Jewish chaplain and from sitting at my own father's rabbinic table. Sometimes my views were accepted; other times, not. But where I most relished my role at Board meetings was when I applied and, indeed, could quote Torah and Chazal, established rabbinic teaching, on any given subject. When I or any rabbi stands on Jewish principles and values, the laity needs to take heed. Our Board seemed always to do this. It is one thing for me to have made the best personal argument that I could; but, when, at times, the issue at hand was subject to direct application from our tradition, I knew that I was on the firmest ground when I referred the Board to the insights and direction from our tradition.

I have loved being a rabbi. I think that the rabbinate is the best expression of being a Jew. What God and Moses did for the Israelites and for the Jewish people who would emerge in the future was to ground us all there at Mt Sinai in a "this worldly way of life." When studied, practiced, and applied to our

circumstances, Judaism offers what I consider to be the best possible way not just to exist but to flourish. As long as I have breath in me, I shall promote the richness of Torah to those whose ears are willing to hear.

There are those who have said that being Jewish isn't easy, but it is a privilege. Representing a different ethic, different ideas, different holidays, ceremonies and even a differing notion of time and place invites skepticism and sometimes even ridicule, resentment and derision on the part of the gentile world. Understanding holiness and trying to emulate the Holy is the never ending challenge of the Jew. Sanctifying elements of life that seem mundane to others, especially in this too fast-paced world, is one of the sanest grounding agents we can assimilate and use to undergird our families and ourselves in a too neurotic, too frenetic and too violent society.

Then, too, blessing fire, bread and wine removes these from being potential threats by imbuing them with special meaning and importance. They are seen as gifts from God never to be ignored or abuse, but rather raised to and in our consciousness of the wonders all around us and the supreme richness of our lives.

Part of the role of an Emeritus rabbi is to remind the congregation of its past. Just as I now represent some of B'nai Chaim's many accomplishments,

Rabbi Severine and you represent the future of this congregation. The mantel is now hers to lead what we both know to be the singular most important element in Jewish life today, that of belonging to, supporting and participating in congregational life.

If I have any regretted moments in my rabbinate, I wish I had said to those who told me that they could be good Jews by being good people, “No! No you can’t. Being a good person isn’t an answer to our societal situation today. Being a good person doesn’t necessarily involve being part of a Jewish community. And if we represent anything to ourselves and to this world, it is as each of us, sets an example of being an active member of this sacred group. No, you cannot sit at home, by yourself and pray, and fulfill a cardinal element of being Jewish. Prayer prayed by the individual barely counts except as it might be an expression of some tragedy or pending and possibly painful challenge. Prayer, to be authentic, must be done in a communal setting. There is a reason that the rabbis required ten to make a minimal quorum called the *minyan*. It was more than ‘there is strength in numbers,’ however true this might be. It was more than our needing others to hold a mirror to our lives so that we might see ourselves more clearly than we would were it us and us alone. It was more than our reformulating the focus of our collective lives to center only on ourselves, our individual-ness as

might those who practice Near Eastern religions. It was..and is!... that Judaism is always enmeshed with and synonymous with the peoplehood of Israel. Note, I said peoplehood, not personhood. What happened to Israel mattered and still matters in this world, while what happens to individuals, while important to them individually, takes a secondary place to our collectively being a critical part of the tri-part essence of our Jewish way of life. We speak of the three: God, Torah and Israel. We are bound in history and practice to be part of each other, and as the collected entity, to be a third of this most critical three-some.

No greater challenge was there at Sinai than to give the people laws by which they could forge a decent and holy society. The degree to which the Israelites succeeded stood them in good stead for lives of fulfillment. The degree to which we of B'nai Chaim come together in the celebration of *Matan Torah*, the Gift of Torah and assimilate Torah's teachings into our lives will enable us to form sacred community and reap those same benefits that our ancestors did.

Today I look to what we have built and what we've accomplished...and I understand the words of the Song of Songs...Ani L'dodi, v'Dodi Li. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. We are intertwined, you and I, in the ideals which B'nai Chaim encompasses at its best, blessed moments. My prayer as your

Emeritus is that B'nai Chaim continues to enjoy many, many blessed moments, as we come together to practice and to promulgate our Jewish heritage.