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Parashat Vayakheil-Pikudei

In his book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard states:

Fire is the ultra-living element.
It is intimate and it is universal.
It lives in our hearts.
It lives in the sky.
It rises from the depths and offers itself with the warmth of love.
Or, it can go back down into the [depths] and hide there, latent and pent up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, fire is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil (Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 7).

Central to the story of Exodus is fire. It burns everywhere: At the bush, on the mountain at its summit, and down at its base. God appears in fire, descends in fire, dwells in the *Mishkan*, the tabernacle, as fire. Fire is a sign of God's presence, and through offerings by fire, the Israelites maintain a connection to the Divine. In the Bible fire symbolizes the core of the relationship between God and humans: a dangerous passion that often leads to fireworks.

Fire welds together the Torah portions from the past two weeks, the final portions of the Book of Exodus. Last week, we read of the molten calf: Aaron, rashly throws gold into the fire and voila, the calf is born. The incident, characterized as apostasy, might be more accurately described as misguided love: an ecstatic passion—unrequited—that ignites God's fury and brings destruction onto the people. In this week's double-portion *Vayakeil-Pekudei*, gold and fire are combined once again, but this time firepower is harnessed for legitimate work: to build the *Mishkan*. Fire lies at the heart of the *Mishkan* project; necessary for many forms of the creative processes utilized in its building; a structure forged by fire to house *Eish Elohim*, God's fire.

This unique construction project requires a special builder: An individual able to translate God's directions into a magnificent, freestanding structure. As the Torah recounts, God singled out for this task of translation, a supremely talented man named Betzalel. Betzalel is, seemingly, an engineer and an artist who, as the text says, *Vayimalei oto ruach elohim. Bechochmah, bitvunah, u'v'daat u'v'chol melachah*. God has filled Betzalel with *ruach elohim*—Divine Spirit; with *chochmah*—wisdom; *tvunah*—discernment; and *da'at u'v'chol melachah*—technical knowledge of every craft.

The Rabbis home in on the Torah's portrayal of *Betzalel* and of his work. These later readers describe him as a smith, one who works with iron and fire, a master artisan taught by God. In Hebrew, a smith or metalworker is a *tzarof*, a term derived from the verb *l'tzareif* meaning to combine, join, purify, or refine. Seizing on the unique attributes of this man, midrash states that Bezalel knew how to meld, not only metals, precious stones, and the other materials used to construct the Tabernacle and its furnishings, but also how to combine the letters with which heaven and earth were created: the very words used to bring the world into being. As Aviva

Zornberg notes, “To be Betzalel is to be the artist who works in fire.. [he] creates new worlds from elements never before fused” (*The Particulars of Rapture*, 476).

Human relationships are a lot like fire:

They can be destructive, and they nurture through the warmth of love.

Relationships burn and heal.

Like fire, relationships need tending, care. Fuel.

In the Torah, fire represents the perils and promise of *qedushah*, sanctity. For me, human relationships are similarly charged: it is through encounter with other individuals that we may experience *qedushah*. As Martin Buber wrote, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them” (*I and Thou*). This assertion of the divine potential within human encounter transforms relationships into a commanding presence, a source of authority for ethics and for the pursuit of justice. For me, the sanctity of human relationships serves as the grounding for my actions as a Jew.

Buber also wrote that “All real living is meeting.” for us all, this has been a year of limited encounter; a year in which to draw near to others is like playing with fire. And without being able to draw close to one another, our lives have felt a bit unreal. When we do meet in-person, our masks cover our faces; with difficulty we try to read each other’s expressions as we interact from six feet away. When we leave our homes, readily able to meet others fully; rather, we come face to face with our vulnerability.

For the writers of this week’s Torah portion, the Mishkan was a place of vulnerability and of reverence. The further you moved inside, towards its core, the more dangerous the experience. And a way to understand the many chapters of the Book of Exodus detailing the intricate descriptions of the Tabernacle, is as a backstory for the Temple. The Torah presents a narrative exploration of how the Temple came to be and of the origins of its design. The most sacred space in the Jerusalem Temple, and in its mythological precedent, the *Mishkan*, was the Holy of Holies. That was where God dwelled. A small space, God’s abode on earth, into which the high priest would enter just once a year. With hope and trepidation, for it was a scary place to enter, the high priest, on Yom Kippur, would delicately move aside the curtain that screened off the Holy of Holies and carefully go in to see if God was there.

Literally, the Holy of Holies was empty. There was nothing in there.

For many weeks now, my colleagues and I have entered, individually, the sanctuary at our Temple, the most sacred, physical space of our community. But if you experience *qedushah* through human relationships then to pray in that space without others is an encounter with emptiness.

When I’m in our sanctuary I miss you: it’s a funny thing to say as we’ve never prayed there together, but I miss you and each time that I enter our sanctuary I dream a little bit about the first time when we will be there together. The first time that I’ll be able to lead our congregation standing side by side with my clergy colleagues: these wonderful leaders with whom I’ve had the great honor of developing relationships during the past year. That will be a moment of

rejuvenation and of uplift when we are able to join our voices together with yours. I smile just thinking about the joy and the energy of that moment of re-gathering.

Happily, cautiously, we are drawing near to that moment of new beginnings. As cases of Covid-19 decline, and as more of us are being vaccinated, we have begun planning for when we can be on our campus, together. Presently, we intend to initiate in person gatherings in May beginning with *B'nei Mitzvah*. Subsequently, we will come together for Qabbalat Shabbat Services. All of our worship will occur outdoors, and we are devising plans to ensure equity of access as we have limited space in our outdoor chapel. In time, hopefully during the summer, we will initiate indoor Shabbat experiences, including Torah Study. And although we are not intending to re-open our school for in-person learning before next fall, we do hope to plan some gatherings for our children before the end of the school year.

With trepidation, but also with hope, we are entering into a complicated time of reformulation, of return. Of rejoining with each another, in person. We will be dealing with Covid-19 and the variants of the virus that cause it for years, so we need to reach some accommodations and adjust expectations to deal with this ongoing reality. And to do so safely and creatively, we will all need to be a bit like Betzalel: combining together the *chochmah*, the hard-earned wisdom we have gained from our efforts to safely maintain and strengthen our interpersonal relationships during a pandemic; the *t'vunah*, the discernment to continually balance our individual needs with those of our Beth Am community; and the *da'at*, the technical knowledge to fuse our in-person gatherings with our new, virtual experiences of learning and worship that we have innovated this past year. And as much as it may feel daunting to emerge from a year of sheltering in place, it is exciting to enter into a new stage of our never-ending process of synagogue transformation.

At the outset of the instructions that God issues for the building of the Tabernacle, God tells Moses,

Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you...so shall you make it (Exodus 25:8-9).

When commenting on these instructions, the Chassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev taught that Moses and his generation conceived of the sanctuary by their own light, by their own prophetic vision. But each generation shall make God's sanctuary according to the visions of its own time and place.

In this place, and at this unique time, we have the opportunity to develop a new vision of Beth Am; to recombine the many elements of our congregation and to fuse them into a stronger and more vibrant community.

In our weekly reading of the Torah. we have reached the end of the Book of Exodus. A narrative theme that begins in this book and that continues throughout the rest of the Torah is that there is no going back; we read of a people that continues to move forward, together. We read of a community like ours: a community that takes risks, together, and journeys forward together, in a continual pursuit of sanctuary and of sanctity.