

Welcoming New Members to the Congregation

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November 20, 2020

I love the relationship that Hebrew words have to each other. They are each part of a family that flows from their root letters. Often a word will connect to tens or even hundreds of other words, giving it additional shades of meaning.

For example, when we have the first meeting of a new havurah, we talk about the creation of that word, *havurah*, from the word *chaver*, or friend, and about how that's part of the purpose of creating these circles within our congregation.

The word friend, *chaver*, is also used for member. *Chaver K'neset* is a K'neset member, someone elected to the Israeli Parliament, and *chaver beit k'neset* is someone who is a member of a synagogue, a place of gathering.

The root originates in the idea of connection. Friends are people who are connected, just as a *chibur*, an essay, is made up of connected words. A *machberet* is a notebook, pages that have been connected for a purpose.

It's that idea of purposeful connection that enriches the sense of *chaver*.

Sometimes when we talk about having a connection to the synagogue, we can mean the personal connections, which we hope our new members will develop with the people that they get to know; but there is also the desire that draws some to the synagogue, the desire to connect to something greater.

In this week's Torah portion, which introduces itself as "*Eileh toldot Yitzchak*"—this is the story of Isaac—our second patriarch disappears almost entirely into the story of his two sons, and particularly Jacob. The first chapter of the portion focuses on Rebekah's barrenness, resolved with the birth of the twins, so opposite to one another. The concluding chapter gives Isaac a role, but a very passive one, the victim of his son and wife's plot to make sure the appropriate son becomes his successor. Only in a brief chapter in the middle is Isaac indeed the focus. In that chapter, God speaks to him twice with promises like those made to his father, and Isaac and Rebekah replay Abraham and Sarah's experience with the King of Gerar, raising some doubts in later minds about how foolish one king could be. And then, in an extended discussion of water rights, an issue that remains as important in the Middle East today as it was then, we are told, "Isaac went back and dug the wells that they had dug in the days of his father Abraham."

This verse calls out to later rabbis for interpretation, and indeed many scholars both ancient and modern have written about it.

Was this about reconciliation, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin asks? Isaac and Abraham never talk in the Torah after the binding on Mount Moriah, and there is no record of Isaac receiving his father's blessing before Abraham dies at the end of the last week's portion. In reclaiming his father's wells, is Isaac reconnecting with his father?

Is this something that happens to us, that after a period of estrangement from our Jewish heritage, perhaps in college or afterward, we are able to "uncover the wells of our ancestors" and draw water from them? Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

writes as well about “a return to one’s roots with a more mature understanding of the faith of our fathers.”

Over and over in our tradition, the Torah is compared to water. The *Gates of Prayer* gathered this material in the introduction to the Simchat Torah service, where we read:

As water gives life to the world, so Torah gives life to the world.

As water revives our life, so the Torah revives our spirit.

As water gathering drop by drop becomes a rushing stream, so the Torah, learned little by little, becomes a stream of wisdom.

As water seeks its level, descending from high places, so does Torah elude the arrogant and find the modest spirit.

As water helps plants to grow, so the Torah helps us to grow in spirit.

Digging wells then becomes a metaphor for the search for meaning and spiritual direction. The Chofetz Chayim notes that one can’t just inherit wells, inherit Torah, but one has to seek out the meaning for oneself, dig out the water for oneself. He further notes that this isn’t always easy, especially not at first, and so it is for that perseverance that we admire in Isaac.

For our new members, whether coming into temple membership for the first time or returning after years of being away, we hope that you will find both friendship

and companions to join you in your own personal seeking. The word *chaver*, which means friend, has also come to mean study partner, *chevrutah*, a person with whom one digs out the deeper meaning in those wells of Torah.

As we welcome our new members this evening, may they and we find at Shir Hadash that which we seek.