

**Shabbat Shekalim [Parashat Vayakel]
Volunteer Appreciation Shabbat
Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim
February 28, 2003
following d'var Torah by Davi Cheng, BCC President**

Davi noted that we deliberately chose this week's Torah portion over last week's to honor our volunteers. We like this week's story of the people gathering together to build the mishkan, the sanctuary, better than last week's story of the people gathering against Aaron and Moses and making contributions that result in the creation of the golden calf.

"I suppose there are different types of communities," Davi noted, and indeed there are and indeed the fact that there are different types of communities might help explain the huge difference between last week's story of social unrest and upheaval and its consequent tragedy vs this week's moving description of a community working together to create a beautiful portable sanctuary in the wilderness, inviting God to come and dwell among them.

That different types of communities create - well -- different types of communities could explain the difference except that, as Davi well knows, last week and this week the Torah is describing only one community - the community of Israel out there in the desert still quite early in their 40 year sojourn.

So though it is true to say that some communities create golden calves and some create lovely tabernacles, perhaps what we should remember is that one community is capable of creating both things - one community is capable of great lows as well as great highs.

I think it's safe to say that if Fran or I or the BCC board thought the BCC community was currently engaged in a great low, we wouldn't have called you all here tonight to honor our volunteers.

Like Davi, I love this Torah portion - for many reasons. For what it says about creating community - that notion that everyone brings gifts of their own free-will, and contributes based on their own skills - musicians give music, wordsmiths give words, weavers give weavings, schelppers schlep, sculptors sculpt, stained glass artists make stained glass, dancers dance, lawyers help interpret rules, teachers teach, worker bees work, drones drone, I suppose -- you get the picture. People give what they are good at, and people give according to their willingness - not more, not less. Implicit in this, I think, is some self-care - this is NOT a "give 'til it hurts" kind of operation God and Moses are producing here. It's a "give 'til it feels good" kind of operation.

That's what Fran and I want BCC to be as well.

It's not always easy knowing when to stop, anticipating the line at which "giving 'til it feels good" suddenly becomes "giving 'til it hurts." I bet in that desert community there were more than a few "volunteers" who -what shall we call it - "over did"? And BCC has had more

than our share of such folks too. Some of you, even. Sadly, we know the consequences of becoming over extended. The consequences of "giving 'til it hurts" is that . . . it hurts!- it hurts the giver, and it even, oddly, hurts the community even though all we intended was to help the community.

We have to keep working on this one, figure out how to draw those lines, take a tip from God instructing Moses to instruct the Israelites - God doesn't want gifts of guilt or over-extending, God asks that each whose heart is moved to do so should give, and then God helps draw the lines, make the lists of what to give. We need to take a cue from God and help one another draw lines, make lists, figure out what is needed and wanted and doable - and what is not. OF course, even in this week's portion, despite God's instructions and limit setting, the people end up bringing too much, doing too much. You thought it was just us who overextend? Let's keep working on those boundaries - together.

Another happenstance of the Jewish calendar helps us remember this balancing act. For as it happens this Shabbat is also known as Shabbat Shekalim, a time in which we are peculiarly supposed to read a few verses from last week's Torah portion before we begin this week's. The passage we read reminds us that those who might be called to war, the men age 20 and up, are supposed to give half a shekel - in other words a small amount of money. I'll take note of the sexist and militaristic aspects of this section another time - in the mean time I'll offer you what the more gentle commentators among us have noted about this passage (including the rabbinic student who lead a service I attended last Tuesday at HUC). They update it a bit, and make it all inclusive -they note that there isn't much you can do with one half-shekl, like the first coin you put into a pushke - it doesn't allow you to do much, but when you add to it all the other half shekls, soon, you have a full pushke, which you can add to other full pushkes, and before you know it - and pretty painlessly -- you have a lot of money with which to do good works. Similarly, one person might not be able to make much difference in the world, until that person gets together with other people all intending to make a difference in the world, and before you know it you have a community, working toward common goals, each bringing his or her particular skills, each contributing according to ability and willingness, and before you know it, you can build a beautiful tabernacle, a place for God to dwell among us.

When we love a place a lot, when we care about a community, it's not always easy to know how much to give or what to give. Even Torah one week tells us give only a half shekl - no more, no less -- and the next week tells us to give freely from our hearts. I think one message is start small, but start. I think one message is join a community. I think one message is make yourself part of that community and before you know it - no matter how small or how large your voluntary, heart-felt contribution - you're soon an indispensable part of the community.

If it weren't for volunteers -- all of you whom we honor tonight -- this place wouldn't be in the world. If it weren't for volunteers -- all of you whom we honor tonight -- we wouldn't be here together making this world a better place.

So will all of you who have volunteered to help with something here at BCC - lately or in the past (we've been around for 30 years), please stand as we offer a blessing.

BLESSING FOR THE VOLUNTEERS

Shekhinah, we are taught that wherever
Jews gather in community, to study, to pray, to help repair the world, You too are there.
Your presence dwells within the room,
looks over our shoulders,
perhaps even comes to rest gently upon them
--just here--giving us a sense
of Your presence in our lives.

And, God, we have learned that
though it is possible to pray alone, or work for justice alone, or create alone, or be alone,
we often feel stronger and
more able and happier in the company of our community.
And to do that, to bring us all together,
companions in a community,
creators of community,
takes work,
it takes planning,
it takes thought and imagination,
good will and good hearts
It takes a lot, Shekhinah, to allow us to draw near to you,
in company, in community, a family coming to speak to You,
to ask Your blessings, to invite You to dwell in our midst.
We couldn't do it, Adonai, without the help
of many, many people.

Bless these people, O God, source of our creation,
bless them with peace and spiritual sustenance,
and the knowledge that they have helped create,
a space in which You happily come to dwell.
Blessed are You, Holy One, who puts within us the spirit, the willingness, the ability to be
part of Your holy community.
And let us say, Amen.