

SHABBAT VAYAKHEL / PEKUDE
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Shabbat Shalom. Tonight we are with Moses and the wandering Israelites as they set out to plan and finally build a sanctuary to God in the middle of the wilderness. We read in the surroundings of our own sanctuary, how our ancestors began to formalize their worship of God and heed the call when God said, "Let them build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." We see how this first place of worship for our people was not even rooted to the ground, but was a portable construction best suited for the wanderings that the Israelites were to endure before reaching the Promised Land. God had very specific ideas about how to put together this Tabernacle, and there is a unit of five Torah portions that refer to this undertaking. Bezalel was chosen as the grand architect for this project, and Midrash says that he was only thirteen years old when he was chosen. Perhaps at that age, he knew that he did not know, and so, maybe, he was a purer conduit for God's plan. In this series of Torah portions, we have God's fashion statement as the robes of the High Priest are described in all of their intricate detail! There is God's take on Martha Stewart as the sections of the Tabernacle are described in terms of their placement, and their size, and their accessories! And we see that it is a formidable job. But tonight, at the end of the Book of Exodus, the Tabernacle is completed.

As we reach the end and complete a Book of Torah, we say, "Chazak, chazak, veneet chazek - Be strong, be strong, and together we will be strengthened." We are reminded to look inward and be aware of our own inner strength and to look outward and around us and be aware of our strength collectively; the strength of family, the strength of friends, the strength of our BCC family.

We tell and retell this story of the building of the Tabernacle every year as we retell every story in our cycle of Torah readings. And every year, we can approach a story in Torah from a different perspective, from a different space, both in terms of our temple family and personally. I was particularly struck by this because this is the third time that I am looking at these final Torah portions of Exodus and sharing them with you. In the twelve years that I have made my way to the bima, much has happened to all of us, and almost like a diary, some retellings of Torah stand out for the context that they were in and the place we have come to.

The first time I approached these chapters was, coincidentally with Robin, as we, along with Shifra Teitelbaum, formed the ritual committee to organize a Shabbaton in the hills of Malibu exactly eight years ago . . . March 19-21, 1993. We were in our own wilderness as we read this week's portions dealing with the Israelites gathering together in strength to build God a sanctuary in the wilderness. And so we decided that the theme for the Shabbaton should be . . . "Chazak, chazak, veneet chazek" to remind us of our own strength within and without. We shlepped up the mountain to get to our campsite, and then when it was time for worship, we climbed a seemingly never-ending wooden staircase to go even higher to our outdoor chapel at the top of the world. It was there on Saturday morning, that I led services and ended my drash saying: ". . . at the completion of the building of the Tabernacle, it is written that 'the cloud of Adonai was upon the Tabernacle by day, and there was fire that would appear in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all of their

journeys.' God was now in their midst. And so it should be for us. In this, our place for God in the wilderness, we look for and find our strength, and we try to feel the presence of God, the presence of the Shechina, in our midst. Not a bad way to start the morning!"

And interestingly, this was the first time that I, personally, felt that presence of God, the presence of the Shechina, for myself. It had not happened before this time, and I can tell a story that proves that point; a story that I've told here before. I, along with Richard Seltzer, had the great pleasure of attending what is affectionately known as Rabbi Camp in upstate New York at Camp Kutz during the summer of 1991. It is a gathering of lay people brought into a NFTY (National Federation of Temple Youth) campsite to experience camp with the kids. And since I had never had a Jewish camp experience, this was my time to live that life and catch up! We were nine adults along with 150 kids worshipping, eating, singing (LOTS of singing) and communing together. Every day we adults would gather for Shacharit services that we would lead ourselves and then be presented with lectures about everything Jewish . . . we were essentially para-Rabbinic students being exposed to everything Judaic in two weeks. One of our teachers was Rabbi Daniel Syme, at that time, newly elected Senior Vice President of the UAHC. He spoke to us about spirituality and the presence of God in our own lives. Rabbi Syme's contention was that Jews didn't talk enough about God. And then Rabbi Syme brought it down to us in our group at Rabbi Camp, as he said: (and I'm quoting him) " . . . Now comes the scary part. There is only one way that I know to get individual Jews to begin to talk about God, and that's to get individual Jews to talk about God. And, therefore, in just a few moments," he continued, "I'm going to ask those of you who are willing to do so, to stand up, and in the presence of this mishpochah, to share the moment in your life when you felt closest to God.

Now if you're like every other group to whom I've presented this exercise," he said, "something has just happened. The thought is racing through your mind: this is not a Jewish thing to do; Christians do this, Jews don't do this. This is 'witnessing.' But the Jews have become so scientific and so self-conscious that we have forgotten that there is a need for spontaneity in expressing our faith. I believe that we have to begin to recreate the impulse to be spontaneous; not in tent meetings and evangelical rallies, but among ourselves. And we start that process here now."

And there was a pause, and Rabbi Syme continued, "In a moment I'll be sitting down. You don't have to raise your hand, and if nobody says anything, we'll just sit here looking at each other for awhile. But for those of you who are willing to do so, this is your time. And I ask you now; it may be a happy moment, it may be a sad moment, it may be a time of triumph, it may be a time of tragedy, but the moment in your life when you felt closest to God. Please stand up now and share with us. It's your time." And the Rabbi sat down.

One after another, slowly, everyone else stood up. There were pauses and there were breaks, but everyone else spoke. One talked about feeling closest to God at the death of his father, one talked about feeling closest to God at the birth of her son, another talked about the time she first realized what Judaism could offer her in place of her angry and punishing Lutheran faith. And I waited until the very end. I debated whether I would say anything. If I waited long enough, the message would be clear that I was not willing to speak. It's not that I didn't have anything to say; I had something to say, it's just that I wasn't sure I wanted to say it. But I finally took a

deep breath, and I said, "I guess I can say this sitting down, and I'm struck by the difference of what I'm going to say about when I have felt closest to God . . . I'm still waiting."

There were two beats of silence, and Rabbi Syme looked at me and said, "King David felt the same way. King David said, 'My soul doth wait for God.' It's written. You're in good company." I had just taken a chance and said something that I felt was going to alienate me from the group. I had just said something that might have possibly separated me from the others, and not only had Rabbi Syme made me feel "not alienated," but in one fell swoop encompassed me into the bosom of the Jewish people. What I felt would separate me the most, did just the opposite. It connected me to the tradition of Judaism and validated my statement and my point of view.

Now, remember the Shabbaton? It was two years after this encounter with Rabbi Syme that I was leading that Shabbat morning service at the top of the world. I had made the climb up that wooden staircase early to set up and prepare for the service, and I took a moment to step to the edge of the cliff and look out at the spectacular view that was provided. The ocean was in front of me at a low angle dotted with tiny sailboats, the beach had moving specks on it, and the road had tiny, tiny, silent toy cars making their way along the winding Pacific Coast Highway. The majority of the view was sky, a blue cloud-filled sky. And at that moment the sun came out, but not just "came out." Because of the clouds, the sun itself was hidden and all that I could see were rays; separate, discrete, magnificently large rays of light streaming toward the water. I experienced awe and wonder, and I needed to capture it in language. And I said one word under my breath: "God."

So if I had to relive that moment with Rabbi Syme now, and he asked us when we felt closest to God, I could say, "It was a Shabbos morning, at the top of my Sinai, where I saw God."

. . . AMEN.