

## "Fire and glass"

Parashat Emor 5760  
Beth Chayim Chadashim  
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That's quite a fire they've been fighting in New Mexico. Frightening, isn't it? Especially to think it had been set by a firefighting expert in the hopes of preventing a fire. I suppose any of us could find ourselves in a situation where a decision we make, at work or elsewhere, could lead to catastrophe - it's sobering to hear a story like this. I do feel for that person, and for all who have lost so much in this fire.

With all the wind we've experienced in LA this week, it's been easy to imagine what's going on in New Mexico. Wind can be scary - it's an east wind blowing all night long that parted the Red Sea [Ex. 14:21] -- imagine how fierce that wind must have been, how frightening. This is the season in which we are counting the omer, counting the days from Passover until the next holiday mentioned in the Torah portion this week - Shavuot. We are to count the days of the barley harvest. I learned from our friend Michael Main that

perhaps the counting of days we do in this time of year betrays anxiety. Anxiety over what? Well, for one the anxiety of traveling through the wilderness with a whole mob of people and no set laws. For another, the anxiety of not knowing what will come next. Maybe the anxiety of having had a fierce wind blowing in your face all night long. Prof. Joseph Milgrom suggests that the beginning of the harvest during which we count the omer coincides with the onset of a season when Israel is often buffeted by a hot, dry east wind (like the one that parted the sea). So, from April to June (roughly a 50-day period - roughly the period we count the omer), the earth's bounty stands in jeopardy of being depleted by these withering winds (exactly what we're seeing in New Mexico). Before the triumph of biblical monotheism, says Milgrom, Israelite farmers probably tried to ward off this danger by daily incantations to the demons of the weather. [from Michael Main's 1999 drash at BCC on Emor]

The wind and the fire make me think of something else too in this season of anxiety. I haven't heard all that much about how the decision was made to start this fire in New Mexico, so I may be off base in even using it as an example, but from what I understand, though a group discussed the pros and cons, it was left to one person to decide. That's often the way it is no doubt in a work place, and you can understand why - among the reasons: (a) someone has to be ultimately responsible, (b) if we wait for consensus (as we well know here at BCC) we may never take any action at all. So little decisions and life and death decisions often are left in the hands of one person.

In Judaism, though, even though it happens sometimes, we're not inclined to make decisions all alone. Perhaps Moses is our model for this. Although he was clearly the human in charge of all the Israelites, he had a lot of help. He had his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. After his father-in-law Yitro taught him to delegate, Moses had lots of people delegated to various management positions. And in the things Moses was not expert in, God had him appoint experts. Thus, as we read in this week's portion, Emor, the priests, headed by Aaron, were the experts in making sacrifices, in keeping the fires always burning at the altar (burning, but not burning out of control. We could have used some cohanim, some biblical priests and levites down in New Mexico this week.) When it came to building the mishkan, the sanctuary in the desert, Moses received the instructions from God, but he delivered

them to the artists - to Bezalel and Ohiliab, the master builders, to carry out. AND THEY WORKED SIDE BY SIDE - COLLABORATIVELY. And of course, all along Moses had God to help. God who gave instructions about what to do next, who was there to brainstorm with when things were going wrong, and in a story we read at the end of this week's portion, was there to make some of the life and death decisions when Moses didn't know what to do [Levit. 24:10-23]. God is also there to give a framework to the life Moses and the Israelites were beginning to live, here in the wilderness, early on in their journey from slavery to freedom.

We spent much of the Book of Exodus, and not a little of the Book of Leviticus, receiving laws and constructing the mishkan, the sanctuary. This week the priests receive very specific instructions about how they are to serve the people and God (a way of worship very different from what we have today). So by this point in our Torah story, we have God, we have a community promising to be the people of God, we have law, we have a way to worship, and a place to worship. Another element is added this week - God gives us fixed times of worship, and then tells us to proclaim them sacred. Mo-adei Adonai asher tik'r'u otam: mikra-ei kodesh eleh heim, mo-a-dai. The fixed times of God, My fixed times, you shall proclaim them sacred occasions. [23:2] The commentators ask, if they are God's chosen times, why do we have to declare them sacred? Aren't they already sacred by God's proclamation? No, they answer, it takes both of us in partnership - God and the people Israel must both set these times apart and declare them sacred. That's how it is with most of what God offers us in Exodus and Leviticus. God likes to work with people, and likes us to work together - especially when it comes to making things kodesh - sacred - set apart. We could, for example, presumably make offerings to God without a special place in which to do that. But God says, no, build a special place, all of you whose hearts are moved to do so, build a special place, and come to that place at special times, on my fixed occasions, on the days you and I have both declared sacred, including that weekly day called Shabbat.

And don't just throw a few 2 by 4s together to make that place. It's not just a place, it's a special place. Don't just throw something together, but instead appoint artists to create this special place. I will imbue your artists, says God, with ruach-chochmah, with the spirit of wisdom. They and I together will design and build a mishkan, a sanctuary.

The root of the word mishkan is the same as the root of the word shekhinah - the name for God that means in-dwelling presence of God. The same root is used in the Hebrew word for "neighborhood." "Build a sanctuary, a sacred place where I will come and dwell among you," says God "[Exodus]. It is as though God were saying, 'I will fill the place with My Shekhinah, My presence, so that when you come there at all the mikra-ei kodesh, at all the sacred times, and when you come there at times of anxiety - uncertain what will

happen next, full of fear or dread or "forethought of grief" [a line by the poet Wendell Barry] -- you will find in this sacred place that the artists built - this mishkan that you and I and the artists created - you will find yourself filled with My presence. Let the safety of it be a comfort to you in your anxious times; let the beauty of our creation lift your heart in our sacred times. Let the visions your artists have placed before you, inspire you as you breathe the beauty of what we have created - together.

What gifts BCC has been given. Members of our community who have given and pledged to us money - more than enough money not only to create sacred art for our simple mishkan, but also extra money to help maintain our congregation, so that we can enjoy the sacred place we create together. And another precious gift BCC has been given -- the gift of artists in our own midst, men and women like the artists described in Exodus, filled with ruach Elohim - divine spirit b'chochma, "of wisdom," u'vit-vu-nah, "and of understanding," uv-da-at, "and of knowledge" in every kind of craft [Ex. 31:3] - men and women of chochma-lev and chochmat-lev "wisdom of the heart" --inspiration and skill that surely comes from

God [Ex. 36:8 among other places] - the inspiration and skill to create, as Bezalel and Ohiliav and the all the artists of the people Israel created **BY WORKING COLLABORATIVELY** in the wilderness, - a mishkan, a mikdash - a sacred space filled with beauty. [I'd like to INVITE UP Jerry Hanson, Davi Cheng, and Haim Ainsworth, part of our stained glass artists team, to talk briefly about the stained glass window designs and construction]