

Beha'alotekha for Yael Maxwell 6/23/00

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Beth Chayim Chadashim**

Isn't Yael doing wonderfully as a service leader? And she's still 3 weeks away from becoming bat mitzvah! It used to be easier in some ways to become bat or bar mitzvah. It used to be you celebrated at just one shul (some kids still do, I guess). And chances were it was not only the shul you grew up in, it was also likely to be the shul your parents grew up in. Not anymore.

Yael is certainly not the only 13 year old who belongs to more than one synagogue, and whose father belongs to a different shul than her mother, and whose grandparents belong to yet different synagogues. Of course it doesn't just happen to 13 year olds. A few weeks back Sandy Rubenstein celebrated becoming bat mitzvah at each of the two different shuls to which she belongs. Don't you feel sorry for those folks who only get to celebrate once, at one place? They're really missing out on some special times!

Yael, you were 7, I think, when I first arrived back here at BCC. You and Sammy and your dad gave me some gifts of welcome - you brought me flowers and the mezuzah which is in the doorway of my study at home. These gifts mean a lot to me - I often think of the three of you when I walk into my study (which I do many times every day). One reason your gifts meant a lot to me was because they told me right away that BCC was important to your dad and that he wanted the two of you to have a relationship with me. Another reason they meant a lot makes me a little sad - it's because I knew that BCC didn't yet have a lot to offer to you and Sammy. And six years later, we still don't have enough to offer you -- consequently you did all your studies at your other shul, and while several of us from BCC plan to be in attendance at your other service, it's just not the same as if we'd had the privilege of studying with you or if we'd all just been around each other more. I am hopeful that in the next year or two BCC will begin to offer much more to you and Sammy and the other BCC kids. I suspect your being here tonight will help inspire even more of us, including you, Yael, to help move us in that direction. Thank you, Yael, for the many gifts you give this community (and me). I hope that in the years to come you and we will exchange many more gifts.

We do already tonight -- with this extra opportunity to celebrate your accomplishments! Fun -- isn't it, Maxwells - to have a community where you can all come and celebrate in a more intimate way? I know it's a gift for me and Fran to share the bima with you, and a gift to all of us gathered here tonight that we get to kvell over you, and for your father that he can celebrate with you in his Jewish community.

I know that the Torah portion you've been studying, Yael, comes a few weeks from now

when you'll actually read from the Torah, but I want to talk for a few minutes about the Torah portion that falls during this piece of your celebration- the BCC piece.

This week's Torah portion, Beha'alotekha, in addition to being a nice one for your grandparents to present candlesticks to you, also gives us an extra reason why we should all be happy that Yael is becoming a bat mitzvah. Oddly enough, the extra reason comes out of some of the difficulties that the Israelites and God experience during their travels in the wilderness. If you've been reading along through Exodus and now the book of Numbers, you know that the Israelites sometimes complain about some of their experiences in the desert. This week things get really bad. God gets furious over their whining and so does Moses. Moses even gets angry at God, saying: "Why have You laid the burden of this people on me? I can't carry all this people by myself, it is too much for me." [paraphrase of # 11:11,14] In fact, Moses is so distressed he even asks God to kill him rather than remain in this untenable position.

What gets Moses so upset that he would rather die than continue with these whining Israelites? After all, when the people first cry out, Moses is willing to intercede for them, and he often is after this time too. But just here something happens that makes Moses pull away, makes him despair over the situation. Listen to the verse that immediately precedes Moses' cry of despair: "Moses heard the people weeping, each one with their own family, each at the entrance of their own tents." [v. 10] What pains Moses so? And God, for that matter, in this scene? The Hebrew especially gives us some clues. One is that when Moses says to God, "why have You placed 'the burden' of all this people on me?" The Hebrew word used for burden is *masah* (aV;m') which does mean "burden," or "load," but can also mean "lifting" or "uplifting." Perhaps Moses is saying to God, "why have You placed 'the uplifting' of all this people on me?" How does Moses know he is left alone to do the uplifting? Well, for one, God is too angry at the people to comfort them, and for another, the verse tells us that the people themselves are no longer "the people [ha-am]," but are instead each individual person, set apart, crying to his or her family, or maybe even apart from, his or her family (the preposition is unclear in the Hebrew). If each person is standing apart at the entrance of his or her own tent, then who is left to give them spiritual uplift? If not one another, or not community anyway, and not God, who is furious at them, who's left? It's only me, thinks Moses, only I am left to try to give spiritual uplift, and I can't do it alone, not when they're in this condition.

Indeed, what does it take to bring spiritual uplift to others, especially if they have isolated themselves? God tells us in the next two verses, in response to Moses's desperate plea for death. God says, bring seventy elders of Israel, bring them to the Tent of Meeting, and "I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it on them; then they shall lift with you the burden (aV;m' *masa*) of the people, and you will not have to lift it alone" in other words, "you will not have to uplift them alone" [11:16-17].

What happened to the Israelites and to Moses in this scene is the opposite of what is happening here at BCC tonight. But what God did to solve their problem - filling others

with the ruach, the spirit, that was in Moses, and then letting those others join Moses in lifting up the people - that is what we Jews are still doing - creating spiritual communities, infusing spirit as a community, back into those who have become dispirited, or better yet, as here at BCC, keeping ourselves inspired so that we don't become dispirited.

How do we do that? In all the many ways we continue and grow as a congregation engaged with our Judaism. But tonight I'd suggest that Yael is a good example of that infusion of ruach -that inspiration - that God describes to Moses. For isn't that at least part of what it means to become a bat mitzvah? Isn't it to become infused with the spirit of Moses? Infused with that spirit - that ruach, even the nefesh ruach that I mentioned earlier tonight -the soul with spirit -the spirit that tells us that it is not for ourselves alone, but for the whole community that we learn to be Jewish, that we live Jewish lives.

When I think back to the way Yael and Sammy and Bruce welcomed me to BCC, it should really come as no surprise to see Yael take her rightful place here tonight as an adult Jew, a prayer leader - indeed, a spiritual leader of our BCC community.

So mazel tov, Yael. And thank you Bruce, Sammy, Charlotte, Sy, Hetty - thank you for helping fill Yael with the ruach we see tonight, and thank you for sharing her and for allowing us all to reach this moment.

[shehekiyanu]

[This was followed by some words from Yael's father, Bruce Maxwell]

After Yael's grandparents presented her with candlesticks belonging to her great grandmother (the Maxwell family lit the shabbat candles). Then Rabbi Edwards: How lovely that shabbat candlesticks are the gift Yael's grandparents are giving her tonight. For both this week's Torah portion and Haftarah contain descriptions of the seven-branched menorah - the Shabbat candlesticks found in the Temple. The Rabbis taught that the word ner (light, flame) is an acronym for the expression nefesh ruach which means, "a soul with spirit." [Itture Torah, vol. III, p. 229] They say that the nefesh ruach in each of us is lit with the light of Torah - so when one becomes a bat mitzvah, the nefesh ruach shines with particular brightness. "Not by might, and not by power, ki im-b'ruchi, but MY spirit, My ruach," says God in this week's haftarah from Zechariah [4:6], the same haftarah as during the shabbat of Hanukah. The candlestick in Zechariah's vision is said to symbolize the mystery of divine illumination. So Yael's gift is a symbol of shabbat, of the generations of her family, of divine illumination, and now too of her own nefesh ruach - her own inner light lit by her study and her life of Torah.