

**Shabbat Pekude**  
**March 7, 2003**  
**Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards**  
**Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles**

Last Monday Tracy and I went to one of the Lysistrata performances. Perhaps you went also? or at least heard that on Monday night in hundreds of cities around the world, people performed or read the ancient Greek play by Aristophanes, called Lysistrata, in which the women go on a sex strike in order to get their men to stop fighting in wars (it was an anti Peloponesian Wars play - it didn't, by the way, apparently succeed in stopping those wars either). Performing ancient plays may not go a long way toward stopping war, but somehow it felt significant - as art often does. Creating art, gathering together in a joint project like making art, it embodies what we ask for - peace. It makes a statement in a way that can touch deeply. And it feels I suppose like the opposite of making war - I feel a new bumper sticker coming on: make art, not war.

It seems to work in the Torah too, where this week, as we finish our annual reading of the book of Exodus, we get to read of the completion of the beautiful tabernacle and tent of meeting that the Israelites, following God's careful instruction, have been creating piece by piece for weeks now. It's been a tumultuous year for the Israelites - escaping from Egypt, the parting of the sea, the various disturbances in the desert, the spectacle at Sinai followed by the golden calf and the shattered tablets, and now they've settled down to express their new found commitment to God by building the tabernacle, so that God might come to dwell among them. They have finally found a common purpose, in common not only with each other, but also with God and Moses. And each person plays to their own strength, contributing what they can, what they want to contribute. You might say this kind of activity simply keeps them out of trouble - and it's true that no more golden calves ensue. But the creation of the mishkan seems to do more than keep them out of trouble. It also connects them to each other, it sets them on a new path.

Some commentators like to contrast the creation of the mishkan - the sanctuary there in the desert- to the creation of the golden calf. One is done with God's blessing and guidance, one is done in the absence of God's blessing and guidance. But other commentators are more struck by a comparison of God creating the world at the beginning of the book of Genesis, and the Israelites creating the mishkan. This comparison is prompted by the Hebrew descriptions of the creation of the world and the building of the mishkan, which share a lot of vocabulary including the words "finished, saw, work, did, blessed, made holy" [Friedman, p. 308]. Toward the end of the creation of the world, God creates human beings in part, we suspect, to be companions to God since they are created in "God's image" b'tzelim elohim. At the end of Exodus we see a glimpse of what this partnership could be: the Israelites (all of them), with God's guidance and blessing, have created a beautiful "tabernacle of witness" (mishkan ha-eidut 38:21). And when it is finally all set up, we are told that God's glory fills it.

In Genesis God creates a magnificent world in which humans come to dwell. In Exodus, humans create a "place of witness" in which God comes to dwell. It's called "a tabernacle of witness" literally because it contains the tablets of the ten commandments, also known

as the tablets of witness. But our teachers noted that this tabernacle of witness serves as witness to many things: to the second set of tablets, which themselves represent forgiveness and reconciliation between God and the people; too, it witnesses the coming together of the people in common purpose: the service of God; it also serves as a reminder that we are here in this world in part to be witness to what goes on - witness to God's world, witness to human goodness and human error. And human goodness and error are always present in the world, the time we live in right now is no exception. The peace marchers, the artists, the actors playing again an ancient story, longing for peace, help us witness human goodness and human error, they also, I think, help us journey toward human goodness.

At Torah study last night, we were particularly struck - I always am - by the beautiful vision at the end of the book of Exodus, after the Tabernacle is completed, we are told, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of God filled the Dwelling (the Tabernacle). Moses was not able to come into the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud took up-dwelling on it, and the Glory of God filled the Dwelling. When the cloud goes up from the Dwelling, the Israelites set out on their various journeys; but if the cloud does not go up they do not set out until such time as it does go up. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of God rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.

Perhaps you noticed that the last verses of Exodus speak not of the "journey of the whole house of Israel," as you might expect, but instead reads, "journeys": When the cloud goes up from the Dwelling, the Israelites set out on their various journeys; but if the cloud does not go up they do not set out until such time as it does go up. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of God rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. Ever since Sinai, if not before, Jews have been learning how to journey together even as we journey alone - each of us on our own life's journey, we stay in community, we stay within reach, within sight of one another, but our history and our future is not THE story of one people, but the stories of people, each one of us journeying in the presence of God. May that presence always feel to you as cooling as a cloud in the hot desert sun, as warming as a fire in the cold desert night.

When Jews finish a book of Torah, we recite the verse you'll find near the top of your seat bulletin. We say "chazak, chazak v'nitkhazek. Be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another." These weeks, war looming, the familiar words take on new meaning. Let me read the last verse of Exodus once again and then, together, let us declare our strength, and let our words and our actions strengthen one another (we need it). [Please stand if you're able to]:

For the cloud of God is over the Tabernacle by day, and fire is in it by night, before the eyes of all the House of Israel in all their journeys. [Exod. 40:38]

"chazak, chazak v'nitkhazek. Be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another."