

Parashat Tzav
Shabbat of Blessing for new Board
March 21, 2003

Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA

We almost always have a Shabbat of Kavod of honor, of blessing, for new Boards of Directors in March, when we're also almost always reading the Book of Leviticus. And so I'm often amused at the thought of what evenings like this might be if Judaism still looked anything like the religion of our ancestors described in these opening chapters of Leviticus - a religion in which sacrificing animals, and offering fresh baked bread, and just-picked vegetables were the way to God's heart. A religion in which the correct spattering of blood, and the dress code for the priests counted more than the heartfelt words or deeds of the congregation. If you've been reading these opening chapters of Leviticus, then perhaps you too could imagine bringing up the new Executive Committee and applying a little sacrificial blood on their right ears and right thumbs and on the big toes of their right feet, as the Torah prescribes for the priests. --not that being president of a synagogue, or rabbi for that matter, is the updated version of being a priest in the Temple.

Still I like to think about it. I like to remember that such a ceremony might be happening if it hadn't been for those original and most radical of all reform Jews -- the rabbis of the Talmud -- who played such a dramatic role in the nature and practice of Judaism, helping change it from the sacrificial cult we've been reading about in the opening chapters of Leviticus into the religion of prayer and study and community, of celebration and support that we know.

We are quick to distance ourselves, for all sorts of reasonable reasons, from this book of Leviticus and from a Judaism that understood animal sacrifice as a way to worship God, to come closer to God, as well as to expiate oneself, or others, of sins committed.

But if we were not so quick to distance ourselves, if we looked instead for the ways we are like those people -- eager to purge ourselves of sin, wanting to become better people, better members of our community, wanting always to draw closer to God, struggling to find ways to do that --if we looked for the similarities as well as the differences, we might find that there is much in this book to hold our attention. For much in Leviticus can speak to us as human beings, simply as human beings searching for ways to get along with one another and to draw closer to our God. "To draw close" is, after all, what the Hebrew word for "sacrifice" - Korban - means - it is a way to "draw close to God."

And in the desire to draw closer to God, and to be better people, we are, I think, quite a lot like the people Israel in the desert, moving tenuously toward unity and

community and God. That's what we've been doing at BCC for over 30 years now. That's what all of you on this new Board of Directors will help us continue to do.

There is a story told of Rabbi Assi on his deathbed. As he lay dying, his nephew saw that he was weeping, and asked: "Why do you weep? Could there be any part of our tradition which you have not studied or taught? Your disciples are sitting here before you. And could there be any act of lovingkindness - of chesed - which you have not done? I hardly think so. And over and above all your qualities, you have never intruded into community affairs; you have never tried to become appointed to an office administering to the needs of the community." Rabbi Assi replied: "That is why I weep. Perhaps I shall be condemned, because I was able to be a leader and was not a leader."

Last Monday night, on Purim, we read with considerable commotion the story of Esther and her cousin Mordecai, and how they came to save the Jews of Persia, against whom a decree had gone out. In the midst of the silliness of Purim we read with commotion, but not emotion. Yet the Book of Esther is a very moving story, and in the noise of Purim it's easy to miss the key passage of the story: when Mordecai sends a message to his cousin, Queen Esther, to tell her she is perfectly positioned to help save the Jews, she replies that she is afraid to do so for she well knows that if her attempt displeases the king, it might bring about her own death. Mordecai sends back an empowering reply: It is the turning point moment for Esther, and for the Jews: "If you keep silent at this time," he tells her, "relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from some other places but who knows whether you have NOT come into royal estate for just such a time as this?" [Esther 4:14] In other words, Mordecai says to Esther - you don't have to do this, someone else will come along, but perhaps this is what you were meant to do.

I bring up this part of the story again even though Purim is past because what Mordecai and Esther discover is what Rabbi Assi did not - they discover what it means to take on the responsibility of a community. It's a message that people who agree to serve on a synagogue board of directors understand. They know that if they decline, someone else will come along; they know that if they don't take on the challenge, someone else will. And they also know that they could be a leader, and so they agree to be a leader.

It's a message - I think -- that all of us, citizens of the world, need to hear in these uncertain times - even though it may be that deliverance will come from some other source than us - who knows but that we have been put in this place, who knows but that we have become the people we are, for just such a time as this.

Something I learn from the Book of Leviticus is that it used to be easier to hear, to know, what God wanted from us. Something I learn from the Book of Esther is that, despite our own uncertainty, our own fear, we ought not decline a call, an invitation, a request . . . we ought not decline an opportunity to do tikkun olam - to make the world a better place.

It's not an easy decision to make: how to stand up in the world, to make your voice heard, to know what to say or do or think in times like ours.

And it's not an easy decision to make to be a leader, to become a member of the Board or an officer, nor are these easy positions to hold -- not at BCC, not at any synagogue, not in any government, as we've learned all too well over the last few weeks. The folks who step down from our board this month, and those who step up tonight have recognized their responsibility: they understand that because they were able to be leaders, they should endeavor to become leaders. Those of you who are leaving the board --: go with our deep thanks for your devotion and your good service, go knowing that you have made a difference go knowing there is no way we're letting you off the hook altogether!

And those of you who are coming onto the board -- and who now serve on the board: the burden of the community rests partly on your shoulders - but, happily, NOT totally on the shoulders of any one of you. You will need each other, and each one of us, and your own inner strength, and the blessings of God, to do the tasks required of you. And never forget that the work you do as a synagogue leader is sacred work -- blessed by God, and a blessing to all of us.

The priests whose ordination we read of this week in Leviticus gave way to the priests who took care of the Temple in Jerusalem. And while they eventually gave way to a Judaism looking more like ours, I still find appealing this idea of protectors of the Temple, of the place of worship, of the center of community, of the home of God. Our synagogue is such a center too, for us, and so it seems appropriate that you who become the guardians of this congregation, who serve on its board, offer to one another a prayer supposed to be as ancient as that Temple.

The first verse I will give to the current and outgoing board members to say to the incoming board members is a blessing found in Talmud and described there as a blessing that the outgoing Watch at the Temple in Jerusalem would say to the incoming Watch. We traditionally use it here before for the changing of the guard on our Board of Directors.

I invite current and outgoing board members to come to this side of the bima. And the new board members to come to this side. [Let them do that] Now I ask, Neil - and would ask Allison except she couldn't be here tonight - to step to the new side of the board as they step up to take on the vice president positions.

This side, will you read to the incoming group:

[For outgoing or current board members to say to incoming members]:

Mi she-sha-khan et sh'mo ba-bayit ha-zeh, hu yash-kin b'nai-khem a-ha-va v'ah-kha-vah shalom v'rei-ut.

May the One whose name dwells in this house establish among you love and companionship, peace and friendship.

And now, a prayer for all of you to read together, a prayer for a safe journey, a prayer for strength.

[The following is for the whole Board -- new and old -- to read together]:

May it be your will, God and God of our mothers and fathers, to lead us in safety and direct our steps in safety. Deliver us from fear. Open our hearts to all who would join our community, as well as to those who choose other paths to You. May we obtain favor, kindness and love from You and from all whom we meet. In our enterprise we need strength. We need a clear vision and wise judgment. But more than all this we need the wisdom not to become so immersed in our tasks that we neglect our dear ones, or injure our health, or become remote from You, Divine Spirit of the world, the Well of living waters. May we walk with those we love in the light of Your presence, O God, and use all our powers for blessing. Amen.

And finally I want to ask the congregation to rise and join Fran and me in blessing your new board of directors with a blessing from 2 of this congregation's favorite teachers -- Torah and Rabbi Janet Marder [Spread the tallit over them all and link up to the congregation]:

Yivarechecha Adonai veyishmerekha

May God bless you with health and strength for the work you've taken on

Yaer Adonai panav eleikha vikhunekha

May you know the radiant joy of serving God, and the warm glow that comes from serving your people well

Yisa Adonai Panav eleikha, veyasem lekha shalom

May God bless you with a sense of humor, with humility and perspective, and most of all with inner peace and wholeness.

And let us say: Amen [SING Shehekhiyanu]