

July 8, 2008

Greetings to everyone (D'rishat Shalom l'kulam, in Hebrew) from Crane Lake Camp!

I have been here long enough (two days) to hear campers sing and pray together, to teach them about Israel along with other faculty members and staff, and to marvel at the sense of community created at the camps of the Union for Reform Judaism!

Expressing a “collective soul” through song and affirming and appreciating how belief in a common goal and purpose can create a sense of unity are very much a part of our lives. Celebrations of American Independence were marked with special songs at concerts and melodies that accompanied fireworks displays. At Temple Israel, we sang Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” to honor America’s folk tradition. Hopefully, these festivities dedicated to our liberty serve to remind us to use our freedom wisely, especially in an election year, when we will, hopefully, grow from serious discourse, and even from debate and disagreement.

In last week’s Torah reading, the Israelites complained about their plight in the wilderness so much that, when Moses was told only to speak to a rock to yield water, he struck it with his staff. His apparent anger prevented him from taking his people into Canaan....or, perhaps, he was revealing his own “burnout” and it was time for him to pass the mantle of leadership to the next generation. Soon after that incident, in a total change of attitude, the Israelites enthusiastically sang together to coax a mysterious well that followed them on their journeys to show itself and quench their thirst....or, it may be that their singing refreshed their spirits enough so that they could open their eyes and notice the springs that were available to them in the desert, but that they, in their self-made despair, were unable to see.

In this week’s portion, the prophet Balaam was called upon to curse the Israelites on behalf of Balak, the king of Moab. Instead, Balaam blessed them several times over, including one declaration that features the words we sing on Shabbat morning – “MAH TOVU OHALECHA, YAAKOV, MISH-K’NOTECHA, YISRAEL – how good are your tents, O Jacob (the descendants of Jacob), your dwelling places, O Israel.” To have someone from outside a community offer praise is a sign of honor and blessing. Such praise can refer to the beauty of a building or to the obvious commitment shown among members of a people, nation or congregation. It is not just appearance, but substance, that can elicit such praise.

As members of a variety of communities – Temple, our neighborhoods, organizations, towns, states, country and humanity – may we sustain a spirit that will enable us to celebrate our freedom and unity and that will inspire others to respond to us with praise for the beliefs and values we maintain together!

**-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.**