

March 19, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

The celebration of Shabbat Across America on March 20, sponsored by the National Jewish Outreach Program, offers us an opportunity to gather to experience a taste of Shabbat. We will join together for a relaxing dinner, which will begin and conclude with special blessings, and then continue with a Shabbat Service that will feature music, readings and explanations of our prayers and rituals surrounding this weekly time of rest that also serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving creation and working for freedom for all humanity.

The Torah reading for this week is “tailor-made” for Shabbat Across America, which calls on us to be with our community in physical space as well as in spirit. Exodus Chapter 35 begins with the command to rest on Shabbat (after a hard week at work!) and then proceeds to describe the building of the Tabernacle, from the designation of the artisans to do the work, to the donations of raw materials from community members, to the completion of that ancient holy space that was the predecessor to the Temple eventually built in Jerusalem.

One facet of Shabbat noted in the beginning of Exodus 35 was that no one was supposed to kindle a fire during the observance of this day of rest. The Talmud later said that one should also not douse a fire during Shabbat. Perhaps there is a fire that we should kindle on Shabbat – that would be a fire in our soul, a special spirit that we can create within ourselves and share with our community – a fire that would lead us to enliven our congregation and enlighten our minds with understanding of what we can do to enhance the world around us and seek liberty for those who are not free.

So, whether in our homes, at Temple on Shabbat Across America or on any Shabbat, and in our own souls, let us find ways to light the fire that can move us to action to create wholeness for ourselves and for the entire human family.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.

March 27, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

Even at times of economic challenge, Judaism teaches that it is important to sustain the value of giving. We learn that everyone, no matter how much they have, has something that they can give to enhance the community. Even if that gift is our presence and our energy, it is still significant, for it can enliven a community and pave the way for greater giving in easier and more prosperous times.

We don't often think of the ancient ritual of animal sacrifice, practiced by the Israelites, as an exercise in giving. The book of Leviticus begins (in this week's Torah portion) by specifying the word for sacrifice – KORBAN. The root word for KORBAN, KUF-REISH-BET, means to “bring close” or “draw near.” The Torah Commentary Etz Hayim notes that “when we give a gift to someone we feel close to, we feel even

closer for having given the gift. The KORBAN both reflects and reinforces the Israelites' bond with God. The point of the sacrifice is not to feed or bribe God but to come close to God."

What we do for our families, our greater community and our congregation is like the KORBAN. When we put the needs of the community ahead of our own needs as we offer our gift, that act of giving is our KORBAN that can draw us closer to our fellow community members because we believed that it was important to provide something for the greater good. This type of approach to giving can sustain a congregation, a community, a nation or the entire world. May we frequently offer such KORBANOT – sacrifices/gifts – from the depths of our hearts and the goodness of our souls.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.

April 5, 2009

Blessing of the Sun!

Judaism provides us with many opportunities to say blessings – when we eat a meal or even a snack, when we do an act for the first time or reach a milestone in life, or when we observe rituals like the Pesach Seder, which includes blessings over candles, wine, and the symbols for the holiday.

One of my favorite blessings is "Blessed are You, Eternal One, Ruler of the Universe, who makes the works of creation." I shared this with congregants at the time of the appearance of the Hale-Bopp Comet in 1997, and it would apply to almost any moment when we realize that there is something special about nature (even at the time of a sunrise or sunset, or seeing a majestic mountain or waterfall).

Judaism has one special blessing that is based solely on our tradition that serves as a poignant marker of time. The Birkat Hachamah, the blessing of the sun, is a practice which began when the rabbis of the Talmud suggested that, when the sun was set in its place on the fourth day of creation, it was put in its celestial position that would correspond to the beginning of spring (otherwise known as the vernal equinox). The sages then calculated how long it would take the sun to return to this exact same spot based on a set formula (which uses a round number for the actual length of the earth's orbit around the sun). This formula said that this cycle would bring the sun back to its "original place" every 28 years. Such a calculation was intended to place the date exactly on the first day of spring every 28 years, but it sometimes varies. March 18, 1981, was the last day for Birkat Hachamah. It is set for this year on April 8, the same day on which Passover begins.

It used to be in Israelite/Jewish tradition that the year began in the spring, rather than the fall. Some of the Torah passages about Passover say that we remembered the Exodus in the first month, not the seventh month, of a Jewish year (now the first month begins with Rosh Hashanah). Nevertheless, this blessing of the sun as a distinctive rabbinically-prescribed practice is something unique, and gives us yet another chance to say a blessing! The online JEWISH MAGAZINE notes that the

purpose of this blessing is to celebrate an astronomical event but to make a spiritual or even theological statement: that creation continues in its cycle, and that, when we say a blessing like this every 28 years, we acknowledge that we are partners with God in preserving creation.

At the time of the last Birkat Hachamah, I gathered with fellow rabbinic students on the lawn of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati to join in prayer for this special commemoration of nature's cycles. I encourage each of you to take a moment on Wednesday morning when you first see the sun to recite the "works of creation" blessing and even to recite the medieval poem I have shared below.

Enjoy the sun as it brightens the beginning of our Seacoast spring - and Happy Pesach!

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.

My Thoughts Awaken Me to See You

By Rabbi Moses ibn Ezra

(1055-1138-Born in Granada, Spain -Scholar/Poet/Philosopher)

Based on a translation by Raymond Sheindlin

My thoughts awaken me to see You;

They show me in my heart's eye Your deeds,

They teach me to tell Your wonders,

"When I behold Your heavens, the work Your fingers made."

Around its course the disk of heaven walks, like a potter's wheel

Enwhirling the world in its cycle.

The disk has no lips, and yet, it tells Your glory to earth

Unmoved within its orbit, suspended in the void.

By cords of Your love, it is set and remains in its place.

There, the sun yearns and there burns,

and of its light some to the moon lends.

While heaven's sphere is spread out like a tent,

with stars blooming on it as a garden,

They all proclaim, as do we, how profound
are the plans that You have laid.

BARUCH ATAH ADONAI ELOHEINU MELECH HA-OLAM

OSEH MA-A-SEI V'RAYSHEET.

Blessed are You, Eternal One, our God, Ruler of the Universe,
Who makes the works of creation!