

Vayak'hel Exodus 35:1-38:20

February 25, 2011

By Patti and Tom Barkin

Patti: Good Shabbos.

It is our pleasure to talk this evening about this week's parsha Vayakhel, knowing that Max will expand our learning tomorrow morning as he becomes a Bar Mitzvah. A warm welcome to the Edelman Meyers family.

I will offer a brief summary and then discuss how we connect our community as a Reconstructionist synagogue to the lessons from this week's Torah portion. Tom will then share with you our wonderful experience from attending the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Convention this past fall when we were honored by this community as *Moreh Derech* or Pathfinders. More on that later.

This week we find ourselves near the end of the Book Exodus. We have come out of slavery in Egypt and, the short version is, now are ready to build the *Mishkan*.

Parsha Vayakhel, which means congregate or assemble, begins with Moses assembling the children of Israel and commanding them regarding the observance of Shabbat (no work, no kindling fire, no acts of creation, etc.), and then instructing them in the building of the *Mishkan*. *Mishkan* is another name for the tabernacle, or as we like to say, the temple. It is the earthly dwelling place for G-d. In a bigger way, it means the whole of the community.

The generosity of the people was overwhelming. People donated the required materials in abundance. They brought gold, silver, copper, blue, purple and red dyed wool, goat hair, spun linen, animal skins, wood, olive oil, herbs and precious stones. How powerful is the human desire to give to something that has meaning! Moses finally has to tell them to stop.

Then, a team of artisans make the *Mishkan* and all its furnishings. This has been described in great detail in the past few weeks' Torah readings. The roofing details, the wall panels, the foundation sockets, the ark, the table, the seven branched menorah, the courtyard, the hangings, the basin, etc. etc. are all defined. The entire nation joined in the *Mishkan* effort.

Reading this portion reminds me of our community and our opportunity to build a new temple of which we gather now and celebrate on this Shabbat. Our entire community and our affiliation with Reconstructionism represent the true work of the *Mishkan*.

The 43rd Biennial Convention of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation was held in Newport Beach California in November 2010. There, we received the JRF's *Moreh Derek*, or Pathfinder, award representing Eugene's Temple Beth Israel. We are greatly honored that you nominated us for this award.

To tie this experience to this week's Torah portion, we would have to say that it is because of this wonderful community, and our involvement for over 30 years, that we feel so intimately connected to the work of the *Mishkan*.

Seems to me that nearly every weekly Torah portion instructs us to observe certain rules: building community, building our lives tied to certain observances, and building our buildings to certain specifications. Our building and our community are, however, part of something much larger and we really felt that at the JRF convention. Now, we want to relay to you that wonderful feeling of belonging to such a wonderful movement.

Tom: In the interests of full disclosure, I want to let you know that attending a Jewish Reconstructionist Convention in So. California was not on my bucket list. In fact, had TBI not, so graciously, named Patti and me recipients of the Moreh Derech award and had my brother, Bob, not been the outgoing President of the JRF, I would not have even considered it.

For those of you who have not seen the movie *The Bucket List*, Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman escape from a cancer ward and head off on a road trip with a wish list of things they want to do before they die. They called their wish lists their bucket lists.

To my surprise, after attending this conference, I came away thinking that this conference or one like this conference should be on the bucket list. The reason is simple—the experience that we had not only celebrated how Reconstructionism contributes to the kind of world that we want to live in, but it also was just plain fun. Combining good works and pleasure is a wonderful recipe.

I'll provide just a few examples of the kind of events that filled the four days of the conference.

Of the many learning sessions was one called, The Greening of Judaism: a conversation between Biblical and Rabbinic Texts – Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and James Cameron. How I ended up in a session with a name like that, I have no idea. But, within five minutes of entering the room, I was hooked. The Biblical texts were the two versions of the creation story in Genesis. Decades ago, Rabbi Soloveitchik teased apart the versions to explain how Genesis offers two dramatically and intellectually different views of how the universe was created. Finally, the instructor, Rabbi Jeffery Schein, used one the works of James Cameron to relate these texts to today. By the way, Cameron is the director of the movie *Avatar*. Schein made his points by showing excerpts of the film on an overhead screen. Bereshit, Soloveitchik, and *Avatar*—that is outstanding teaching.

A four day conference offers the luxury of time to meet others, share stories, and revel in the wealth of talent that can be found in our movement. An impromptu group of rabbis, lay people, and other music lovers would appear almost spontaneously with guitars, keyboards, and all manner of percussion instruments. I have never heard so many versions of Adon Olam—the Mississippi Delta blues version, the Broadway show version, the contemporary pop version—all

accompanied by wild syncopations and harmonies. Imagine 15 or 20 Rabbi Yitzes converging together with nothing better to do with their time than celebrate Shabbat with music and singing—long into the night and well after Patti and I went to sleep.

The overall impression left by this convention is first, the depth and breadth of the web of Reconstructionist congregations, and, more importantly, Reconstructionists throughout the US and the world. Second, the wealth of intellectual and creative resources in the movement. And, third, how much fun that one can have in a community of people of congregations that share a common set of values.

So, while the JRF Convention was not even a candidate for my bucket list, I became a believer. Whether one goes to a JRF convention or another convocation, taking the time to expand one's intellect, one's spiritual dimensions, and one's emotional core should be on everyone's bucket list.

Putting this all in terms of this week's parsha, the *Mishkan* is already there, we just have to take the time to find it, replenish it, and enjoy it.

Patti: In closing, I want to be sure to acknowledge all of you who have given so much to building the Reconstructionist *Mishkan*. This community went through a wonderful, thoughtful, challenging and energizing process in the 1990's to affiliate with a major Jewish movement (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox are the other choices). The process was a valuable way for our community to delineate our values and create our collective vision. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, described Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people. As Jews, belonging to a Jewish community is a core traditional value, an inherent responsibility of being a member of the Jewish people. Supporting the institutions of the Jewish community is crucial to maintaining its vitality and strength. I want to summarize how we at TBI do this:

- Decision making is a collaborative effort. Our decision making process reflects Mordecai Kaplan's founding philosophy that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization.
- We see G-d as a Power or Process working through nature and human beings. It is therefore incumbent upon us to bring divinity into the world through our actions.
- We pride ourselves on being a welcoming community. We invite non-Jewish partners to be active in our community. We have an unwavering commitment to be an inclusive community, welcoming to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered Jews, as well as multicultural families, Jews of color, and other groups traditionally excluded from full participation in Jewish communal life.
- We have always been dedicated to being fully and consistently egalitarian. The movement has always ordained women and was the first Jewish community to hold a formal *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony in synagogue over 70 years ago. . .and all our prayer books are gender neutral.

And, so we are part of a movement that we can be proud of, that we can resonate with and that we share values. As Mordecai Kaplan is quoted as saying: "One cannot be a Jew without actively belonging to the Jewish people."

It has been our joy to be active Jews with you in our *Mishkan*.