

Congregation Shaarey Zedek: A Virtual Community 2,000 Years in the Making 2020 Parashat B'har-B'chukotai

Rabbi Aaron Starr, based on Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *All Israel Are Responsible for One Another*, Covenant and Conversation p. 423-428.

Shabbat shalom. The sages tell the story¹ of a group of people on a boat rowing down the river. One of the passengers took out an awl and began boring a hole in the boat beneath his seat. The others said to him, "What are you doing?!" He replied, "Is that any concern of yours?! [I'm not boring a hole beneath your seat,] but only under my seat." They said to him, "[Whether it is under your seat or our seats, if you are drilling a hole] you will sink the whole ship, and we will all drown." So it is that our rabbis come to teach, *kol Yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh: All Israel is responsible for one another*.

Of course, the idea of collective responsibility is not unique to the Jewish people. Historically, the human ability to collaborate and to share in collective responsibility elevated our species above all others. First in small groups of families, then as communities, and now as civilizations we partner together to obtain food, water and shelter, as well as to achieve security from other groups of people or even wild animals. In modern times, as citizens of our respective cities, counties, and country, we are well aware that our individual choices affect broader society and that others' choices affect us. This message resonates loudly today and over the last couple months, as we act together, as individual states and as one nation, to slow and please God to stop the tidal wave of suffering from the novel coronavirus. We are all in this boat together: when one drills a hole on his side we all drown and when one patches a hole in our collective boat, we better stay afloat.

This was true, too, of our ancestors living in the biblical era. As we well know, the Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, is entirely contextualized around the Land of Israel: either we were located in the Promised Land or we were desperately trying to return to that small piece of earth between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. To that point, our double Torah portion this week, Parashat B'har-B'chukotai, reiterates a common biblical message that observance of the *mitzvot* -- adhering to divine law -- is tied directly to our ability to remain in our land: we rise together, but we also fall ... together. We remain in the land together, or we are exiled together. We float together, or we sink ... together.

But while the idea of collective responsibility is not unique to the Jewish people, the notion that collective responsibility can transcend physical proximity is unique to us. Two millennia ago, when the Romans destroyed our Holy Temple and exiled the Jewish people from our land, we were -- in every sense of the term -- defeated. We lost all that had seemingly united us: kings, prophets, Land and Temple. We were forced to spread north, south, east and west, and we adopted the habits, behaviors, ideas, language, and clothing from every land in which we dwelled. Jews and Judaism diversified. In the threat of that dispersion, our sages knew that shared memories can fade and, especially as time passes, shared hopes can even be diminished.

But it was in that moment of great upheaval that our rabbis looked to our Torah portion this week and in a daring act of radical biblical exegesis revolutionized Judaism.

¹ Leviticus Rabbah, Parashat Vayikra 4

In that era of Roman conquest 2,000 years ago, the early rabbis looked to Parashat B'har-B'chukotai which tells us that when we fail to follow God's laws our enemies will chase us and we will, as Leviticus 26:36-37 tells us, "stumble over one another." And in a physical sense, that is exactly what happened. That is not, however, how our rabbis interpret the verse.

Rather, our rabbis read the text metaphysically. They explain, "They shall stumble over one another *because* of one another." That is to say, *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh: All Israel is responsible for one another.* We stumble over each other because we are responsible for each other. From this verse our rabbis concluded that, even in defeat and when we are no longer a nation physically connected, we are one people: united and strong.

In his commentary on this week's Torah portion, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks elucidates the significance of their teaching. "No other nation ever constituted itself in such a way. Lacking all the normal prerequisites of nationhood -- territory, proximity, sovereignty -- Jews remained even in exile a people, the world's first global people ..." and then Rabbi Sacks' adds what is ironically quite a prophetic sentiment: we Jews are the world's first-ever "virtual community, a community not in space but in the mind, held together solely by the invisible filaments of collective belonging, shared fate, and mutual responsibility."

That sentence, written many years ago, struck a chord with me this week: we Jews are the first virtual community. Just as our rabbis of long ago taught that we can be united as a people though we lacked physical proximity, so too can and must we in the Shaarey Zedek family remain united: "a community not in space but in the mind, held together solely by the invisible filaments of collective belonging, shared fate, and mutual responsibility." Indeed, whether we are in the magnificent CSZ building again next month or next year, whether our High Holiday services have an in-person component or whether they are entirely on the computer, ought to matter less than how we continue to honor and celebrate our sense of collective belonging, shared fate, and mutual responsibility.

By way of a parable our sages teach, "It is the way of the world that if a person takes a bundle of reeds and tries to break them together he cannot. If, however, the sticks are taken one by one, even a child can break them. So too with Israel: they are redeemed only when they form one bundle." If it is true of the entire Jewish people, so too is it true with Shaarey Zedek, with the Jews of Metro Detroit, with the citizens of the State of Michigan and with these United States: we are redeemed -- we are secure and at peace -- only when we stay strong as one.

This Shabbat of Parashat B'har-B'chukotai, let us remember that it is in many ways easy to be united when times are good, when we can sit 20 feet from our bar and bat mitzvah kids and shower them with candy. But it is the mark of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation when our sense of collective responsibility can transcend physical boundaries to become a community not in space but in the mind and heart. Indeed, it is a mark of greatness when we can shower our bar and bat mitzvah kids with love when we are 20 miles or even 2,000 miles apart from one another. And that is exactly what we are doing right now for you, Daniel, and for your family. It is a mark of greatness too

when we can and when do care for and uplift those among our CSZ family who are in need -- whether we are 20 feet away, 20 miles away, or even 2,000 miles away.

Friends, may we remember in this era of covid-19 and beyond, that drilling a hole under our own seat affects everyone onboard and may we also remember that we are far stronger when tied to one another than when we stand out individually. May our boat float, may our bundle be strong, and may we strive together to be, truly, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation united not by physical proximity but by mutual responsibility, shared love, and profound faith. And let us say together, Amen and Shabbat shalom.