

You Are Not Alone - July 5, 2024

I was tempted to give a D'var Torah tonight on this week's Torah portion, Korach, which is a dramatic story about the thirst for power and the trials of leadership. But I thought I'd better save politics for at least my second week on the job. Instead, I wanted to share a little bit about myself with you, about how I approach the rabbinate and what I hope we'll be doing together. So this is my rabbinic vision statement, which I shared with Temple Beth Torah's search committee when I applied for this position. My apologies to the members of the committee who've already heard it!

When challenged to teach the whole Torah while standing on one foot, the great sage Hillel said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole Torah, and all the rest is commentary; go and study it" (Talmud Shabbat 31a). If I had the chutzpah to respond to the same challenge, I would say, "You are not alone. That is the whole Torah, and all the rest is commentary; go and study it." You are not alone. To me, that is the essential lesson of Torah, and the lesson that guides my rabbinate.

First, "you are not alone" is a reminder of our ethical obligations. To live in community requires us to balance our own wants and needs with the wants and needs of others. How should I treat the people I love? How should I treat the people

I don't love? What does it mean to deal honestly in business, to care for the environment, to love the land and people of Israel, or to pursue justice? The Torah addresses all of these questions, and the synagogue is a wonderful place to explore them, both through the study of our texts and through the living of these lessons. We ask how the values of Torah can be expressed through the very fabric of the congregation. How does the institution -- including its physical campus, online presence, publications, hiring, budget, and governance -- reflect the values of Torah? How do we create a culture of respect and belonging for our members in all of their diversity? Answering these questions requires that we remember, "You are not alone."

Second, "you are not alone" is a promise. If you are suffering, whether through illness, divorce, the death of a loved one, or any kind of loss, you will not suffer alone. If you are celebrating a new marriage, a new baby, or a new job, you will not celebrate alone. Having grown up in the warm embrace of a supportive Jewish community, I witnessed the power of that promise. Now, as a rabbi, it is my honor and privilege to be with people during the most significant moments of their lives, to perform the rituals that help people find meaning in these moments, and to bring the strength and comfort of community into these moments.. We are blessed with a rich tradition of rituals around birth, coming of age, marriage, illness,

death, and everything in between. Helping people to discover and integrate these rituals into their lives is one of my greatest joys.

Third, “you are not alone” offers us a place in the long history of the Jewish People. Through our study and practice of Judaism, we link ourselves with Jews of the past, present, and future. When I study Torah, I am never alone. I study with gentle Hillel, and with his cranky colleague, Shammai, too. I study with Rashi, the clever French wine-seller, and with Maimonides, the proud Egyptian doctor, with the saintly Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and with my beloved teacher and mentor Rabbi Janet Marder. When we study Torah, we study with all the generations of Jews who loved these words and found meaning in them - in ghettos and *shtetls* and study houses all over the world. And with our studies, we add to the Torah that the next generation will inherit.

Finally, “you are not alone” represents the continual search for the Divine. Since I was a child, I have always had a strong faith in a personal God, a loving Presence with whom I have a personal relationship. When I was in college, I read Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* and it simply knocked me out. One line in particular has stayed with me for over twenty years. “You need God in order to be, and God needs you—for that which is the meaning of your life” (“I and Thou” 130). Buber’s description of encountering God, of a personal relationship between the I and the Thou, a relationship that makes demands on me, matches my experience and my

understanding of the Divine. God needs me, for that which is the meaning of my life. I certainly appreciate that Jews have a wide range of beliefs about God, and that theology and spirituality are challenging to many people, but I still affirm that reaching for something Transcendent, seeking the Holy, acknowledging that we and our world are not all that is -- this is a quest worth pursuing. They don't call us Yisrael, the ones who wrestle with God, for nothing.

What is the essence of Torah? "You are not alone." Here is a guide to help us live in harmony with others. Here is a reminder to love and care for one another in times of joy and in times of sorrow. Here is a window into the past, a mirror of our present, and a view of the future. And here is a gift of *ahavat olam*, a Torah given to us in love, holding within it a glimpse of the Eternal. "You are not alone: that is the whole Torah and all the rest is commentary. Go and study it."

I can't wait to go and study it with all of you.