

“Open Tent Shabbat”

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Rabbi Karen Citrin

In this week’s Torah portion, we find ourselves along for the ride in the ultimate family road trip. As we get ready for summer, picture your own family road trips for a moment. “Daddy, are we there yet?” “Mom, when are we stopping?” “When are we going to eat?” And a few minutes later... “Are we there yet now?”

Even the best-made plans can bring a fair share of whining, *kvetching* and complaining. This brings us back to our Torah portion, *B’haalot’cha* in the Book of Numbers (8:1-12:16). It is not a road trip exactly, but more of long forty year journey by foot. At this point in our Torah, the Israelites have spent years wandering through the wilderness, marching toward the Promised Land of Israel. The children of Israel are tired, and hungry from eating only manna. They cry out to Moses, “Why did you take us out of Egypt? We want meat to eat.” In other words, to put it frankly, “this road trip stinks.”

When the Israelites complain, each person is only thinking of him or herself. But in this week’s *parasha*, they start to learn that the journey is better when they feel connected to one another. There is one word that appears nine times in this portion. (Richard Eliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*) It is the word “*asaf*,” meaning, “to gather.” The play on this word takes us through a transformation; from the self-absorbed concerns of complaining troublemakers to the embracing generosity of a concerned community. (Rabbi Suzanne Singer) It is better when we gather together.

This lesson is felt most poignantly when Moses’s sister Miriam falls ill along the journey. During her illness, she is sent out of the camp to recover. Sometimes we are like Miriam. We feel disconnected, outside of the camp, wandering alone. We also know how good it feels to be welcomed into the camp, to re-enter the tent. We journey in and out, and hopefully find new ways to draw near to one another.

In the case of Miriam, an amazing thing happens. The entire community of Israel decides that they are not going to travel on without her. They wait for her to heal, and they welcome her back into the camp. It is better when we gather together.

Judaism teaches that we were created to be in community - to look out for each other, to hold one another up, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to teach our children, to joyfully celebrate Shabbat, to seek meaning in our lives, to find God. Fortunately, here at Temple Beth David, our tent is wide open not just tonight, but every day. Words don’t fully capture the welcoming spirit. Look around and you can *see* it, long time members sitting near new faces. You can *hear* it in voices blending together. You can *taste* it, because your rabbis believe, if you feed them, they will come. And you can *feel* it, in the warm welcome, the kind encounters with people and lasting relations, the generations learning from one another, and the loving spirit of shaping a future together.

Our Torah tells the story that as the Israelites continued on their road trip, a cloud covered their tent, and each day the cloud would move forward pointing the way. This cloud provided shelter, comfort and direction. The cloud symbolized the cohesiveness of the group, reaching out and drawing people together. Sometimes, we call this cloud God.

We all need a spiritual compass to guide us forward. The Temple Beth David tent provides just that. "Are we there yet?" No, not yet. But we are getting closer. Our family road trip goes on. And we need all of you to help us move along on our journey. We are so glad you are gathered here together. Shabbat Shalom.