

Rabbi David Baum's Installation Speech
Summer 2009, Congregation Shaarei Kodesh

Here we stand- waiting. We are at a critical moment, a moment that many have experienced before us, and many will experience after us, but this fact does not diminish the importance and sanctity of this moment. We are a community of people in transition, a congregation emerging from childhood into adulthood.

For those who have been a part of Shaarei Kodesh from the beginning, this moment may seem like we have reached the promised land, the land of milk and honey.

The early years have been ba-Midbar, in the wilderness. The midbar is a good place to be. In fact a famous French scholar once noted, "the symbol of the desert is one of the most fertile in the Bible."

The Midbar, the wilderness or desert, was a time of trial and tribulation for Bnai Israel, but those times were the most formative. One can even argue that the midbar is the one of the holiest places in Judaism. It was where our ancestors found their faith, and it is where we accepted our Torah. It molded the character of our people.

We have crossed the great wilderness of a year gone, and we stand on the mountain, waiting. As a congregation, we have also moved to a new part of our identity. We stand, on the precipice of greatness, looking out to the Promised Land: we are at the beginning of a New Year.

But we stand at the beginning of another story, a new journey; one that has yet to be recorded. I often think that we must have the same feelings that Bnai Israel did as they stood on the borders of the Promised Land. We stand here today, unsure of what the future will bring. One of my teacher's from the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr. Diane Sharon, taught us that the next steps of Bnai Israel played out in two parallel realities. In the book of Joshua, Bnai Israel conquered the land miraculously and with little serious opposition. But in the book of Judges, the very same Bnai Israel failed to attain the complete victory that was expected. They made numerous mistakes and failed more than they succeeded. Victory was not handed to them as it was in the book of Joshua. These two books occurred at the same time, they are two realities.

During that class, she taught me that our futures and destinies have yet to be written.

We have a choice, will we succeed, or will we fail? I do not know what book we will follow, Joshua or Judges, but I know that our future is in our hands. I have been a part of this congregation for less than three months and I have met some of most dedicated and hard working people. You all see that your destinies are intertwined with our people. You know that your success is dependent on your community's success and you know what it takes to succeed.

This week's parashah, Nitzavim, opens with Moshe speaking to his people: You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer- to enter the covenant of the Lord your God...to the end that He may establish you this day as His people and be your God.

This short paragraph gives us a glimpse as to what it takes to establish a covenantal community. It is up to every single person, from small child to elderly adult; and of all different occupations, whether you are a woodchopper or a water drawer, a lawyer or a dentist, or a student or retiree. But how do we find that spark within us? This is going to be our goal for the year, to find the talent within all of our congregants.

We sent certain invitations to this installation with a quote from Pirkei Avot: Aseh le'cha Rav, u'kneh l'echa chaver: Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend. You made yourselves a teacher by bringing me here to Shaarei Kodesh, but this verb is not in past tense, but present tense. Over the years, you will constantly make me your teacher, and I will make you my teachers. My role as a Rabbi will change,

and grow, and I look forward to this adventure. I know that I am standing at the end of my time as a student, and I am taking my first steps as a Rav. I am delighted to be here in South Florida where I began my spiritual path as a leader in my synagogue and youth group. I feel so fortunate to return to this great community, which has done so much for me, because I want to give back, and strengthen South Florida's role as one of the centers of American Jewry.

u'kneh l'echa chaver - Acquire a friend: how do we acquire things? Usually, we acquire things through money, but we need to rethink what it means to acquire something. When we acquire something we trade something of value, to get something of value. This is why the text uses this word. In order to build a true relationship, you have to give of yourself, and you have to receive from others. This is what Shaarei Kodesh needs to be. We must give and take in the form of support in good times and bad, we must feel comfortable to offer and accept Dikduk chaverim, constructive criticism, we must teach Torah and learn Torah from one another, we must open ourselves up to each other. When we acquire something, we make it a part of us. When we acquire a friend, we build a relationship, and we share ownership of that relationship.

Baruch of Tulchin, a great Hasidic master and the grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, wrote about the words, "kulchem" (all of you) in Deuteronomy 29:9 saying that the whole of the community is greater than the sum of its parts. We are greater as a whole because our strengths and amazing qualities are magnified for all to see. In order for us to be whole, each one of us must do his or her share.

We have to be a congregation of stakeholders. We have acquired each other and we must have a stake in each other.

In this week's parashah, the Torah states: "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day." (Deuteronomy 29: 13-14). The Midrash asks a question, why does it use the word stand when it refers to the Israelites who were standing there that day, but when it refers to the future generations, including us, it does not say stand? The Midrash says that in fact we were there on that day, but not our bodies, our souls.

We are part of a holy covenant born thousands of years ago. Just as we were at Har Sinai, just as we were at our Holy Temple in Jerusalem, just as we were at the establishment of the state of Israel, so too do we stand here today. Our future is unwritten, but we have already started the chapter of this year. We have come together in tefillah, and limud Torah, we have raised money for tzedakah and given to those who need help, we have supported those in good times, as you have supported us in the birth of our child, and those in bad times.

I am confident that if we continue to work hard, if we reach out to each other, and if we act in the way that I know we are capable of acting, we will reach the Promised Land together.

I leave you with God's message to us in the book of Joshua:

Hazak V'Ematz – Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.