

Lighting the Lamps of Jewish Continuity

D'var Torah - Shabbat B'ha'alotekha

The sea of ticketed passengers clad in bright orange at DIA was a sight to behold. And by orange I mean bright orange, hard to miss neon orange. This wasn't an outbreak of Broncos Fever pre- or post- Super Bowl. It was something even better. It happened last Sunday afternoon, Father's Day, in DIA's West Terminal near the United Airlines ticket counter, as seventy Jewish teens from Denver and Boulder departed for the five-week Israel Study Tour. Thirteen of the teens and three of the IST staff are Temple Sinai members. As always, it was an emotional sendoff. The teens were anxious to line up for security; the parents wanted one more hug before sending their children halfway across the world. For me, it was a moment of pride to see our youth so eager to embark on this adventure, an adventure that hopefully will reinforce their connection to our Jewish past and inform their future commitment to God, to Torah, to Israel and to the Jewish people.

The annual IST sendoff often coincides with Father's Day, which I think is the perfect time to begin a journey that focuses so heavily on Jewish ancestry. In Poland, the teens visit towns in which many of our ancestors lived dynamic Jewish lives prior to WWII. They also tour some of the former ghettos, as well as the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau. Such a pilgrimage is emotionally taxing for adults, let alone for 16 and 17 year olds. But imagine how proud the victims of the Holocaust would be of our kids for coming all the way from Denver to memorialize them, to make sure that their names and their stories are not forgotten.

Spending a few hours, let alone a few days, in Poland is more than enough time to convince anyone of the vital importance of the State of Israel. Because of Israel, there

Lighting the Lamps of Jewish Continuity

D'var Torah - Shabbat B'ha'alotekha

never will be another Holocaust. Because of Israel, Jews have a safe haven, a welcoming home that will accept us unconditionally. In a few hours the IST group, clad in their orange travel attire, will go up to Israel. For four weeks they will experience the marvels of modern Israel and connect with their heritage in our ancient homeland. In addition to our historic roots, one of the roots they probably will come across in Israel is a beautiful plant called *moriah*, *salvia Judaea*, Jerusalem sage. You too can see this magnificent plant in its native habitat by participating in Temple Sinai's Israel Adventure next June. I promise to point it out to you every time I see it! By the way, the tour already is half full, so don't delay if you plan on signing up. If, however, you are not able to join Rick and me in Israel next summer, you can see the *moriah* plant's American cousin right here in Denver. It grows in abundance in Greenwood Village, especially along Dayton between Orchard and Belleview and in Tommy Davis Park. What does it look like? The plant grows about 3-feet tall. It has long, hairy stems covered with fuzzy, velvet-like, gray-green leaves. The leaves are heart-shaped at the base, long and slender and come to a point at the top. When in bloom, the stalks are topped with whorls of buttery-yellow flowers that give off a sweet floral aroma.

Amazingly, this plant connects directly to this week's Torah portion, *B'ha'alotekha*, in which God instructs Aaron to kindle the lamps of the *menorah* every day. Of course we're not speaking about the Chanukah *menorah*, the nine branched candelabrum. We'll deal with that in a few months. What's referred to in this *parashah* is a seven-branched candelabrum, such as the one on Temple Sinai's logo and on the *bimah* in the Zwerin sanctuary. Aaron was responsible for keeping this lit every day. Why? So that

Lighting the Lamps of Jewish Continuity

D'var Torah - Shabbat B'ha'alotekha

the lamps continually cast light as a symbol to the Israelites of God's eternal presence in their midst. It was a reminder to the people that they were not alone on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. It was a sign that God was with them continually and unconditionally. It's a beautiful, comforting image. And now you may ask, what in the world does this have to do with the *moriah* plant, with Jerusalem sage? Everything! In Exodus chapter 25, God instructs the artisans to make a *menorah* according to this pattern:

³¹ You shall make a lampstand of pure gold.... ³² Six branches shall issue from its sides; three branches from one side of the lampstand and three branches from the other side of the lampstand. ³³ On one branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals... so for all six branches issuing from the lampstand. Ex. 25:31-33

Viola! The *menorah* constructed in the wilderness was patterned after Jerusalem sage. Our ancestors probably were familiar with it since it grew in Egypt, and for sure they would be able to identify it once they arrived in Israel! And to think you can see it right here in our own backyards! I'll never walk past this plant again without thinking of the *menorah* kindled by our ancestors in the wilderness!

As we learn from this week's Torah portion, it was imperative that the flames of the *menorah* not go out. Aaron and the Levites were tasked with the responsibility to keep them lit on a daily basis. Seeing the seventy IST kids last week in their neon orange t-shirts reminded me of the seven flames of the *menorah*, times ten. We know that it was not an easy task to keep the flames of the *menorah* lit. It took diligence, attention to

Lighting the Lamps of Jewish Continuity

D'var Torah - Shabbat B'ha'alotekha

detail, and continued commitment. We have a comparable task today of igniting and keeping alive in our children a Jewish spark. It's a perpetual challenge, but I think we're doing a great job. That's why we invest in IST and other Israel teen tours, like NFTY Adventure. That's why we promote Jewish summer camps and offer generous scholarships so our kids can attend them. With each experience, we light the lamps of Jewish continuity.

That's why on Sunday, I'm leaving Denver to spend two weeks at our regional URJ summer camp, Goldman Union Camp Institute in Zionsville, Indiana (a fitting town name for a Jewish camp). This summer marks the 50th anniversary of my first year at a Jewish summer camp. I love camp. For me, summer isn't summer without camp, and I know how fortunate I am to have the privilege of returning to camp year after year. As a child, summer camp was where the Jewish spark was ignited in me. My URJ camp had the tag line "For Living Judaism," and that's what we did, 24/7 for 4 or 8 weeks. Every aspect of camp was infused with something Jewish, and I loved it. I was inspired by my counselors and unit heads, many of whom became Rabbis or Jewish professionals. In turn, I have helped many young campers who now are Rabbis and Jewish professionals. As a Rabbi, my goal in going to camp is to pass along that Jewish spark that was stirred up in me. How do I do this? Mostly by teaching. I coach counselors responsible for planning their unit's daily Jewish educational programs. I tutor B'nai Mitzvah students. I work with high school seniors, engaging them in Jewish learning and discussing with them ways to remain active in Jewish life as they go off to college. And I schmooze a lot, of course with the campers, but more important with the staff, talking

Lighting the Lamps of Jewish Continuity *D'var Torah - Shabbat B'ha'alotekha*

about life as a Jewish professional and impressing upon them the importance of remaining Jewish leaders and role models outside of camp.

As I said, I love camp, but there's one place that I'd rather be than camp: Israel. I'd love to be at Ben-Gurion Airport on Saturday night to welcome the IST participants to Israel. I know that they'll arrive in Israel changed after their experience in Poland. Poland is a land of *yizkor* candles. But Israel – Israel is different. Israel's symbol is the *menorah*! Israel represents light and life. Israel represents our connection to God and to Torah. Israel represents peoplehood and family. Israel represents homeland and haven. Israel represents hope. The lights kept aflame in the wilderness represented hope to our ancestors: hope that they were not alone on their journey, hope that God was watching over them, hope that one day God would lead them home to *Eretz Yisrael*. In ancient times Aaron and the Levites were responsible for keeping the *menorah* lit. Today, when there is no physical *menorah*, all Jews are responsible for stoking the flames that keep this hope alive. All of us are responsible for teaching the traditions to the next generation. All of us have a role in planting, nourishing and nurturing the roots that will enable us to continue to grow and blossom as Jewish individuals and as a Jewish people as we continue our own journeys through life.