Matot-Masei 2020

Re-Ordering Priorities

סדר עדיפות *Seder Adifut*

What counts most in the Book of Numbers

This week we conclude the Book of Numbers. It seems apt. My family and I have been counting down the days of quarantine since our arrival. In Hebrew quarantine is *Bidud* from *Boded* meaning alone. But during these quarantine days we did not feel alone because of the kindness and good deeds of the members of this community. Angels (*malachim*) have appeared at our doorstep each day bringing us food, and even toys for our children. Thank you for sustaining us with your love and caring.

This community too has been counting down the days till we could come back home to our Temple. Psalm 126 is our people's classic song of return (sing Eisner melody) "*Shir Hamaalot B'shuv Adonai*" meaning *"God when you returned us from exile we felt like we were in a dream, our mouths were filled with laughter and songs were on our tongues."* Tonight, and with Noah's help, we are singing. We are back home having services at our Temple. We have dreamed and waited for this day. And even if we are not all here yet physically, at least spiritually we are connected. Through Operation Shabbat Shalom dedicated members have brought Challah and candles to every family and every individual in this congregation. Like Challah woven from separate strands into a whole, tonight we are connected by a love of shabbat (sacred time) and a love of community (sacred relationships). A huge thank you to the volunteers who through their deeds of loving kindness, *gemilut hasadim*, made this possible – for us to be a *kehila kedosha* - a sacred community.

Covid 19 has given us all time to pause and to reassess our priorities. What really counts in life? So much is fragile, so much us is uncertain. What can we really count-on?

This question is one of the most important themes of our Torah Portion. The tribes of Reuben and Gad come to Moses and say "Where we are now, this is a rich land, and we are rich people. We have lots of cattle and flocks. Moses, let us stay here. We do not want to cross over the Jordan River with the rest, let them go into the land of Israel. We like it here. We can build pens for our cattle and sheep, and then towns for our children."

Moses hears this and is worried. The community is in danger of becoming divided. The finances of a few is about to take precedence over the needs of the greater community. In one of the most important moments of |Jewish education Moses helps these two tribes reorder their priorities to understand what really counts in life. First Moses speaks to them about mutual responsibility for the welfare of the whole community – all the tribes. And then Moses does a brilliant reversal of the order of their own words to educate about Jewish priorities. Moses flips the wording of their request which emphasized their livestock and then their children – Moses instead says "When you return from helping the other tribes, then first build towns for your families, and only after that, build pens for your cattle." And the people adopt the re-ordering, emphasizing people before possessions."

The pandemic has shaken up our lives and our routines. We have a chance to reassess what really matters most. Moses tells us in our Torah portion to put first a priority on community and family. I am proud that our community is striving to do this with Operation Shabbat Shalom and many other new initiatives.

Martin Buber taught God can be found in the sincere meeting of human beings. When people come together for a worthy purpose then the presence of the Divine can dwell among us. This is my hope and prayer. May we conclude the Book of Numbers with a sense of what really counts in life. It's not about counting our possessions; it's about counting our blessings. It's about knowing we can count on each other as a sacred community – a Kehila Kedosha. It's about each of us saying you can count on me. I care about our future, count me-in.  Our custom when we finish a Book of Torah is to say together Hazak, Hazak, v'Nithazek – "May we strengthen each other." Shabbat Shalom.