

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 11/21/18

Va Yaytzay 2018

On the evening of October 28th we lit 11 Yahrzeit candles here on the bimah in our Sanctuary to remember our 11 Jewish brothers and sisters who were killed while attending shul at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh. Later that week, I moved all 11 of them while they were still burning to our chapel where they remained, long after all the wax was gone. Then, the day before yesterday I moved those empty glass containers to the display case outside our sanctuary. We have, (like all other Jewish institutions, I suppose) increased our level of security and police presence here at Beth El. Those candles are a reminder not only of those who perished, but of our resolve as a community to make sure everyone feels safe, protected and at home here. We should never feel physically vulnerable in this, our spiritual home.

Ironically, it is only when we feel physically safe that we can feel our spiritual vulnerability. It's only when we know we are physically protected that we can allow our minds to wander inward. And while we know at some level that we are blessed, we also know that we are indeed vulnerable in ways we cannot anticipate. Try as we might, we cannot fully protect ourselves against illness and disease. As much as we work out, exercise and eat right, we cannot stop the process of aging. As stable as our family life is today, we cannot control the decisions others make that might impact their lives and our lives. All of us, no matter how hard we hope and pray, are going to face emotional challenges, even hardship and loss. At some level, we are all spiritually vulnerable.

One of the reasons we call this place Beth El is that it was at Beth El that Jacob was at HIS most vulnerable. On the run, fearful for his life, separated from his family, he feels isolated and alone. And it is precisely then, at his lowest that Gd throws him a lifeline in the form of a ladder. That ladder he sees in his dream represents the potential to move up, to lift himself emotionally and spiritually from the dark place he finds himself. It is Gd's way of reminding Jacob that he has more potential, more good in his future than he could possibly imagine in the present moment. It is a reminder that he can move beyond where he is now, to a better place and a more rewarding life. But it is important to note that it is only when he is at the bottom that the chance to move up appears. And indeed Jacob does just that. He meets the woman of his dreams, falls in love and marries. He becomes prosperous and starts a family. He climbs that ladder that Gd put in front of him.

And that's why we call this place Beth El. This is the place where we can all come together, wherever you are on the ladder. Some may feel like they are at the top. Life is full of simcha and all is not only going according to plan, but even better. And if that's you today - Mazal Tov! But I am sure that there are also people sitting here today, or last week, or a month from now who come with heavy hearts, with emotional and spiritual burdens, with strength flagging under the pressure. Well, the ladder is here for you, too. And I know that when you are down at the bottom it's hard to see a way up, a way forward. I get it. I've been there, I know.

But we call this place Beth El because we are a People who know what it means to be down and out, we, as a People, are familiar with loss. Our People have endured many Pittsburghs, many Berlins, many Warsaws, Krakows and Spains. And each time we fall back we manage to find the ladder and we climb back up again. We have never lost hope that learning and life can come from loss and despair. We call this place Beth El because when you come here you know that no matter where you are on the ladder, there are always living examples of people, and communities that have found that way up and out, and so will you. We come to be inspired by others who have tackled problems at least as challenging as our own, and have done so with utmost grace and dignity. Some of them are sitting here right now. We call this place Beth El because it is here that the full spectrum of human emotion is lived, week in and week out. Up or down, this is our spiritual home.

In his dream, Jacob sees angels going up and down the ladder. And it is easy to understand why they are going up since he is so low. But why are we told that the angels are going both up AND down? To teach us that the angels, the voices of hope and encouragement, meet us where we are at, whether we are on the way up, on the way down, at the bottom or the top, or anywhere in between. To be a Jew is to never be alone. There is a spiritual presence that accompanies us on our journey, making our best days even better and filling our lowest days with hope. That is the philosophy of our People; a resilient People, climbing the ladder of life together. That is the approach to life that makes this place Beth El.