

A Year of Encompassing Torah



Prepared by
Rabbi Steven J. Rubenstein
Temple B'nai Abraham
Beverly, MA
Rabbioli.Steven@verizon.net

Parashat Chukkat

**July 5, 2008
2 Tammuz 5768**

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**Parashat Chukkat 5768
Well-Endowed By Our Creator**



***"We hold these truths to be self-evident:
That all men are created equal; that they are
endowed by their Creator with certain
unalienable rights; that among these are life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..."***

So begins one of the most memorable governmental documents ever written. Each year, on July 4th, we recall these monumental words recorded on the Declaration of Independence, and the people who signed their names below to declare their loyalty to the mission outlined above.

I find it quite interesting that our American forefathers, who were quite familiar with the Bible, chose the pursuit of happiness to be one of the unalienable rights of the new nation that they were in the process of establishing. However, this is not what I wish to focus upon this Shabbat. On the day in which this document was signed and ratified, it acknowledged the biblical tradition of establishing a group of enlightened individuals to help guide the rest of the people who were willing to follow them in their wisdom as they chose to disobey their king and break free from the tyranny perpetuated by the mother country an ocean away.

What intrigues me on this day is how we have chosen to honor the bravery of such politicians who debated vociferously the pros and cons of declaring war on England. In Boston, of course, we wait all day for the Boston Pops to strike up the orchestra as we anticipate the instrumental ensemble of the musicians as they include the bells from various churches around Boston as well as the guns manned by our military men and women on active duty as each plays their role in the 1812 Overture along with the singing

a medley of patriotic tunes. While there is joy on this day of picnicking and barbecuing, we also pay homage to the current military and the soldiers who stand their post as the rest of us stand guard over our individual patches of grass at the esplanade, or wherever we choose to park our blankets at more local displays of fireworks.

This Shabbat I invite you to engage with me in an exercise that will stretch us in our own sense of patriotism or American nationalism by considering how we would like to rewrite this document for a new generation of children. IN the renewal of our vows to this country, we look around at our nation and we see what liberty has enabled us to accomplish not only as individuals but also as a community, and we wonder if our unalienable rights have indeed brought us fulfillment – or is there still much to accomplish!?! If we were given the opportunity to rewrite this document for the present generation, what rights would we change?

In July 1909, a woman of valor by the name of Emma Goldman, recorded these words in response to the Holiday that we celebrate this weekend. She called her document “A New Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all human beings, irrespective of race, color, or sex, are born with the equal right to share at the table of life; that to secure this right, there must be established among men economic, social, and political freedom; we hold further that government exists but to maintain special privilege and property rights; that it coerces man into submission and therefore robs him of dignity, self-respect, and life...”

No longer are these ideals limited to God. Rather, they are a matter of humankind, in which we assume responsibility for one another’s welfare, regardless of race or gender. The elections are approaching quickly, and the opportunity to choose a new president awaits us to cast our ballot. As we struggle in our decision to elect a new head of state, we contemplate the many changes that both candidates propose for a country which has lost its direction. May this patriotic weekend be our opportunity to consider that values that motivate us to fight for what is right and just, and way we be moved in positive ways to see them fulfilled.



**Sermon Prashat Chukkat 5768
To Life, To Life, Lecha'im...**

Reb Tevya loves to sing about his emotional turmoil in life. It is how he manages to cope with the many changes that he sees happening not only in his own family, but also in his small shtetl inside Russia. Perhaps there is no song that is more boisterous than the one in which he celebrates with Lazar the butcher and they sing together, “*To life, to life, lecha'im... Lecha'im, lecha'im, to life...*” Judaism is a religious tradition that cherishes our moments of celebration. When God fashioned the universe, each day was worthy of celebration when God concluded it with the words “*tov me'od – very good!*” We, too, affirm the good-ness in our lives with our prayers each morning in our daily worship. Even when things are not so good, we recognize the joy in being alive through our sense of community, and through the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim*, the obligation of visiting the sick, that is incumbent upon all of us and not relegated to just the rabbi or a chaplain. And when a person’s life is taken from our midst, the deceased is treated with dignity, while at the same time we are obligated to comfort the mourners, caring for the needs of the bereaved, offering them hope from their despair. In my remarks to the family at the time of a funeral, I often mention that the stories that we tell are meant to bring healing to broken hearts, giving those who are in grief an opportunity to put death in a proper perspective, that life is a gift to be cherished and celebrated even when we are not in the mood to think about our pain and sorrow in that light.

What we discover in our recitation of certain psalms, is that Judaism is a religion that accompanies us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

I am often asked what Judaism teaches us about the world beyond this one. Is there a heaven and a hell? If so, what do they look like. To the sages who comment on this question, heaven is a place where they can sit in a great library and study from one another, gaining in their wisdom.

Another midrash claims that heaven and hell are identical, with a spread of food that defies description. In both places the utensils are longer than the length of your own arm. In hell the people starve because they are unable to feed themselves. In heaven, the people are quite satisfied by their portions because they have learned how to feed one another.

Others claim that heaven is the place where souls are recycled. Dara Horn provides us with a compelling description of how this happens in her novel, "World To Come," devoting an entire chapter on how she envisions each soul is re-educated before it returns to earth and occupies the body of another human being. In Judaism, in the Ashkenazi tradition, we claim that the souls of our ancestors are recycled whenever we offer a name to a new child, hoping that by doing so the child will inherit the characteristics so adored by our relatives who look on in heaven.

For our ancestors of the Bible, however, there is no interest in what lies beyond this world. Death is met with a direct response to the idea that there is "*tuma – contamination*" that is to be dealt with in a proscribed manner. In the Torah portion for this week, God tells Moses and Aaron "whoever touches one that is slain with a sword in the open field, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be *tamei* seven days." What this means is that this individual is in a state of quarantine for that whole time and is ineligible to bring his offering to the priest to be sacrificed to God. Making a sacrifice was their way of being forgiven for their sins, and allow God to be with them both as individuals and a community. So, it is no wonder why there is so much angst in relation to this issue of being ritually impure. To become *tamei* (impure) by coming into contact, and in some cases even being in the presence of a corpse was to no longer be able to bring those sacrifices, to no longer be able to participate in public communion with God. For a full seven days, the Israelite was cut off from worship with other Jews.

For a *kohein*, a priest, the restrictions regarding coming into contact with the dead was even more stringent, which is why some *kohanim* to this day will not go into a cemetery, even when it is a member of their own family, preferring to stand outside along the fence. It is for this reason that many *kohanim* and their families are buried next to a fence rather than towards the middle of a cemetery.

Clearly there was the development of a differently mentality towards death for the Israelite community in relation to their neighboring cultures. We know about the Egyptian fascination with death and the focus on the world beyond this one as a place where the soul and the body is lavishly preserved, often at the expense of human slaves. Even today, young Muslim men and women are being encouraged to become martyrs for a cause by strapping on a suicide belt and blowing themselves up in a public place is a reason for celebration because you will be rewarded in the world to come.

Judaism teaches us differently. The rewards that await us on the future is based upon the merits that are earned in this world through acts of righteousness and loving-kindness. We fix our attention on our actions in this world rather than looking at what awaits us in the next one. By secluding a family who has suffered a loss, we encourage the individuals who grieve to focus upon the love that death cannot ever destroy. By removing the mourner from appearing in public, both in work and in worship, we offer the family an opportunity to focus their spiritual and emotional energy on healing rather than on worrying about what awaits us in a place beyond this one.

Sitting shivah is one of the important rituals that we often short-change ourselves in our rush to get back to a familiar routine because we are afraid of feeling our emotional turmoil. Even when we celebrate the life of someone who has lived a long and fruitful life we must take an appropriate amount of time to mourn our losses. May all those who are suffering from a loss find comfort among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.