



Torah for Turbulent Times “Reaching Out”

About twenty five households joined together on Sunday to participate in our community gathering for solidarity, peace and healing. Tears, thoughts and feelings of frustration, anger and love were shared. Along with a range of emotions, some spoke of the need for a renewed process of introspection, personal learning, and challenging conversations still to be done in the work of battling injustice and racism. This made me think of the most quoted of all Jewish texts. “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I’m only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” (Pirkei Avot, 1:14) Now certainly seems to be the time! What are the concrete, next steps we can take as a community to do our part?

In a timely way this past week’s Torah portion reminded us of the importance of shouldering our responsibility in the world. As our ancestors wandered in the wilderness they carried the Torah and all of the holy objects on their shoulders. Torah represents our ultimate values and was thus carried carefully, not *shlepped*. That’s why when we gather together for Shabbat, we remove the Torah from the ark, rest it on *our* shoulders, and parade it honorably around the sanctuary. As one commentator notes, Torah represents the highest *kavod*/honor of our people.

The responsibility literally rests upon our shoulders to actualize the values and ethics of the Torah in the world. When it rests on our shoulders and not in the ark, it can be shared with everyone. Suddenly, I’m feeling nostalgic and yearning for this simple ritual which I certainly took for granted pre-pandemic. At this point it feels like a long time ago. As the Torah was marched around in the Roth Center sanctuary, it encircled us, demarcating a certain holiness, as our community gathered in prayer and study. As it went around, our ritual practice was to reach out, to touch it, and to share in it. We reach out in order to bring it into our hearts and lives.

It occurs to me that while we’re not touching the Torah, or each other with handshakes or hugs lately, the gesture of reaching out is even more important for us today. If you haven’t already, I invite you to reach out and say “mazel tov” to friends and family who have a graduate at home who missed out on the important rites of graduation. Reach out by sending a letter to a friend. Reach out to family and friends and have *that* conversation. Reach out beyond our comfort zone. Reach out in solidarity.

Though the Torah may sit sheltered and snug in its closed up ark for the time being, it's really meant to be with people. Resting firmly on our knobby shoulders, it's truly comfortable, becoming open and accessible to all. Reaching out is also a grand gesture of who we are. When we reach beyond ourselves we grow, and we bring those things that feel far away closer to us. We know this from our daily interactions with others. And, we're keenly aware these days when it's missing from our lives.

May this time of continued distancing remind us to reach out even more, and bring us continually closer.

-Rabbi Mark