

Torah for Turbulent Times

“Biblical Technology for Today – The Cloud: Comfort, Guidance & Presence”

Each day more and more questions, doubts, anxieties, and fears loom - like a cloud hanging over us. As both young and adult children are now home, in many ways their own cloud stretches from wall to wall in our houses. It's a small storm of more togetherness, more home-space-time management, more arguments, more conversations, more screen time, and maybe, a little more joy? (the silver lining in the cloud). This week was unique. For the first time our family, like many others, began “remote learning” with our children. In our community, Shabbat services and Torah study continued seamlessly on Friday night and Saturday morning over Zoom. Today's technology is unique in helping us to stay connected (and somewhat sane) in these unusual, uncertain and isolated times. Our ancestors also had a unique version of technology: *The cloud*.

In last week's Zoom Shabbat Torah study, we chanted and completed the Book of Exodus. The portion, Va'yakhel-Pekudei, among other things, details the completion of the original *Mishkan*/Tabernacle. It's fulfillment required volunteer offerings from each and every person. Then, we learn that G-d's long awaited presence appeared. Taking on the form of a cloud, it hovered over our ancestors' portable sanctuary. (Exodus 40:28-38)

Rather than cloud our understanding, this pillowy puff intended to convey clarity and precipitate purpose and meaning for life. First, a few details stand out and were highlighted in our Torah study. We begin with a screen that was put up in front of the entrance to the Tabernacle, effectively providing quarantine from the outside elements and guarding the holiness within. This area thus remained sanctified, purified, healthy and holy. Next, an ancient laver and area were set up for washing. “From it Moses and Aaron and his sons would wash their hands and feet; they washed when they entered the Tent and when they approached the altar.” Sound familiar? With the Tabernacle now in full functioning form, we learn that the cloud covered it and that G-d was present. The Israelites would only move their camp when the cloud lifted. By day, it rested above, and by night, a fire would appear in it - always in view of the entire people throughout their journeys.

What was the purpose of this “Biblical Technology?” In short, it provided comfort, guidance and protection. It was a combination of natural elements, which during a time of uncertainty and wandering in the wilderness, helped to bring balance to life. It brought shade cover by day and lit things up in the deep darkness of a desert night. It was something for all of the people to gather around. While they camped separately around the Tabernacle, they remained one community with the appropriate social distance. Hovering above, the cloud & fire helped to center and unite them. Given those hundreds of years in Egyptian slavery, the people needed something they could see in order to strengthen them. This very same cloud & fire first appeared at Mount

Sinai. Their atmospheric reappearance connected the people with their own personal past, grounded them in the present, and provided hope for the future. No matter where they were in the wilderness, the Presence was, well, present. Exodus and the story of our collective people began in oppression and darkness, and commentators note that fully transformed, it concluded in freedom and fire, literally, a light at the end of the book!

Even today we can share a flame from this mystical fire when we light Shabbat candles each week in our homes. The Rabbis teach that candles are a Shabbat priority. We learn that if we had to decide between wine for Kiddush or oil for candles, we go with the candles. *Why? Because they bring shalom bayit, peace in our homes, by allowing us to see each other.* Light, aspiration, hope. With so much more time at home for all of us these days, let's find ways to customize and maximize peace in our homes, be it Shabbat candles, wifi, phone calls, cards, hikes, or seeing each other over Zoom Shabbat services.

With optimism and hope we finish the Book of Exodus. We affirm, "*Hazak, hazak v'nithazek*/May we go from strength to strength." And, in somewhat muted, yet joyous anticipation for Passover (and hearing the story all over again), we also affirm, "*Dayeinu*/Enough already!"

-Rabbi Mark