

Jacob becomes Israel: Bet Yam comes of age.

December 4th 2009

Dedication Shabbat

And God said to Jacob, "Arise go up to Beth El and remain there. And build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau." He remembered that location as the original place that God first revealed himself when he fled Isaac's house from his avenging brother Esau years ago. Jacob dedicated this monument to his own spiritual journey and with an eye to the journey all his children would travel down the road. God spoke to Jacob and captured the moment of coming of age by saying,

"You whose name is Jacob

You shall be called Jacob no more

But Israel shall be your name.

Thus he named him Israel

And God said to him,

"I am El Shaddai

Be fertile and increase

A nation, yea an assembly of nations

Shall descend from you

Kings shall issue from your loins

The land I assigned from Abraham and

Isaac

I assign to you

And to your offspring to come

Will I assign the land." (Gen 35: 9-12)

Does this divine charge resonate for us as we dedicate and commemorate our own congregation's journey over the years? We settled in the low country over a quarter of a century ago, and like Jacob built a sacred space here. It was not, however, the end of our journey in Hilton Head. A new synagogue

would certainly elevate us to another spiritual level of engagement in Jewish life. Our Hanukkat HaBayit the dedication of this synagogue, celebrates more than increased membership. Tonight we celebrate our own coming of age just like Jacob became Israel. Is this not a night when we reflect upon the challenges to create the consensus to make this capital campaign a reality? And so, therefore, at the end of the day, did we not emerge from this journey wiser and even more committed to the purpose of Congregation Bet Yam?

As Jacob brought back his new family, including Leah and Rachel and the children from them and their women servants to this new home, did he not feel that he had come of age not only as the provider for his tribe but also as the Patriarch to fulfill a divine promise? Is our return to this new facility also a symbol of our coming of age as a Jewish community as we return home to this holy ground?

Tonight our leadership thanks all those who participated in this enormous process. Tonight we reaffirm that original vision that brought us all here. What have we achieved? We have done more than beautify our edifice. We have raised our mission to touch the lives of Jews in the low country. We have introduced to our parents and children a new inheritance where children, parents and teachers can pass on the heritage of Judaism just as Jacob would do for his children in the land of Canaan.

What have we achieved? The beauty of what we see and the sacred worship space is our Bet El our house of God. It is our Jerusalem down from the Jerusalem stone that adorns the bimah to the Holocaust Torah which was dedicated this morning in its new transparent glass case. Yes, our achievement is the understanding never to forget that the journey to grow and sustain a Jewish community is not easy but it is worth every bit of our strength. Actually any journey that a religious community embarks upon will no doubt face challenges and that struggle is part of what ultimately defines the preciousness of what we came to embrace as well as the external features of what we see here in our temple.

The key is for us to be aware that what we are seeing reflects our congregation's journey and commitment to provide Judaism in the low country. Is there a connection between the physical beauty of this sanctuary and facility and the spiritual artistry that is working through us? The beauty of Jacob's journey that serves as a model for us in this week's portion is remembering the journey itself. Jacob can move forward but not at the cost of forgetting where he came from. His journey is a cycle of exile and return and that fits in, for good or for bad, to a much broader history. Our temple's rituals remind us of that connection to all of Jewish history as well as to the Jewish future in Hilton Head, Bluffton and the low country.

God said that with Jacob's return to Canaan the promise to Abraham and Isaac would be fulfilled and that he would start to see the planting of seeds that would one day sprout forth a great people in this land. God assured Jacob by saying, "A nation, yea, an assembly of nations shall descend from you." For us what does that mean? Try to imagine that years from now the individuals, families and couples, who are ready to begin a new chapter in their lives, will take their place in these pews and own this temple just like we do now. Imagine more B'nai mitzvah parents crying on the bimah as their children become

young adults in the faith. Imagine the weddings, the anniversary blessings, the Purim celebrations, the High Holy Day services, the Passover Seders, lectures and learning that will undoubtedly fill this space with holy sparks ricocheting off the walls into the spirits of generations to come in the same way this wonderful and joyous faith has done for us. Now it is our turn to lead and till the soil. One day it will be the turn for another generation of Jews and Rabbis as well to preserve the memory as they fulfill the ancient divine promise.

Our achievement is to reinforce a Jewish future for Bet Yam to the next generation. We are no longer Jacob but we are now Israel.

“ Ashreinu. Mah Tov chelkeinu UMah Naim Goralieinu u Mah Yaphah yerushateinu. How happy our lot!
How wonderful our destiny and how joyous our heritage!”