

D'var Torah by David Crankshaw

Giving Honor

Ki Tavo - Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8

August 31, 2007

Seven years ago, on a warm summer evening much like this one, our family was having a backyard barbeque with friends. We had recently completed our paperwork to become members at Congregation Beth Am. And we were trying to understand our education options. We knew that our friends had participated in the Shabbaton program and happened to ask them about it. It became the main topic of the evening as our friends extolled the virtues of an education program that included their whole family.

Our own experience with Shabbaton showed us that everything they said was true. From singing "Pharaoh, Pharaoh" to the old Kingsmen tune "Louie, Louie" complete with hand motions, to grappling with how to examine an ethical dilemma using Jewish text and ideas, to singing the prayers of Havdallah in the soft glow of the sunset.

Through Shabbaton, our family learned together and developed a relationship with the Beth Am community. We formed family friendships during that time that have created an enduring bond.

Even more than our family's good experience with Shabbaton, I began to see how it, the other youth education programs, and life at Beth Am did more than transmit ideas. Whether it was teachers making an effort to bring Judaism to life or congregants modeling what they feel inside about their relationship to our teaching, people were living their words.

If we turn to this week's parasha, we can see that this characteristic of our community goes back to its very origins. In Ki Tavo, the Israelites are told in two places that they are on the path to becoming a holy people. First they are told "And you shall be, as he promised, a holy people". [Deuteronomy 26:19]. Then later, "The Lord will establish you as His holy people" [Deuteronomy 28:9].

Gunther Plaut observes that in Exodus (19:6) when the Israelites are referred to as a holy people, the Torah uses the Hebrew *goy kadosh*. But here in Deuteronomy, as the Israelites are completing their journey in the desert, the Hebrew is *am kadosh*. During this time of wandering, they have progressed from *goy*, a "nation like other

nations", to *am*, a "people with a spiritual purpose." [Gunther Plaut, The Torah, A Modern Commentary, p. 1530]

What does it mean to have a spiritual purpose? Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, a prominent 20th century rabbi in Poland, said that "a person's primary mission in this world is to purify and elevate his (or her) soul." (Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness, p. 13). Our job then is to develop our character traits to allow the holiness in our soul to shine through.

We don't need a special place or time to cultivate these character traits, in fact the best place to practice is in our everyday life, in the circumstances that life presents to us.

And what characteristics might we cultivate in our relation to the children at Beth Am, to their staff and teachers, and to our fellow congregants? The trait I think is most important in this regard is honor, or *kavod*.

Honor is the opposite of judgment, that voice in our head that likes to keep up a constant chatter about the appearance, behavior and decisions of other people. It is a recognition of the value and inner beauty of another.

Alan Morinis explains, "Honor, respect, and dignity are due to each and every human being not because of the greatness of their achievements or how they have behaved, but because they are home to a soul that is inherently holy." (Morinis, p. 109)

Honor is both a state of awareness and action. We act with honor when we treat others with respect and dignity. We act with honor when we listen carefully to the needs and concerns of the other.

We act with honor in relation to the children in our congregation when we support them in their journey, when we demonstrate through our actions our commitment to our teaching, when we expose them to the beauty of Judaism and then let them form their own relationship to it.

We act with honor in relation to our education staff when we take opportunities to thank them for their work to give our children the best education they can. We honor them when we keep to our commitments, and when we respond flexibly to changes and unexpected surprises. And we honor our staff when we approach concerns, disagreement and conflict with the intention to find a common ground, when we remember that "I am a soul that is striving

to become holy and that I am speaking with another soul that is striving to become holy.”

Has Beth Am done everything it can to provide opportunities for parents to honor our children’s journey and the education staff with their support? Probably not. We haven’t always made it easy for parents who want to volunteer, for them to provide support for our programs, to know what is needed, or who to call. For this reason we are forming Beth Am Parent Kesher, a parent association for all parents at Beth Am. Kesher means “connection” and we want to make it easy for parents to form a stronger connection to the youth education programs, the staff, and to each other.

The primary goal of Parent Kesher is to offer a variety of ways to participate through volunteer support; something for everyone. Perhaps you’d like to be a class parent for the Sunday Program? Or help Tuesday Night Program with special events and toledot? Or simply attend one of the parenting sessions this Fall hosted by Rabbi Marder and a panel of developmental specialists to talk about books like “Blessings of a Skinned Knee”.

We hope that all parents will find an opportunity to offer some support to Beth Am education programs during the year by volunteering their time. Each program at Beth Am will have a parent leader who will coordinate volunteer activities with the education staff person for that program.

We will all benefit. Our children will see us living our words. The staff will have the volunteer support they need. Parents will have an opportunity to support programs that are most meaningful to them. Beth Am will build connections among parents who work together to enrich both the lives of their children and our community.

In some respects we have come a long way from the early days of Beth Am. We are bigger, more heterogeneous, our programming is richer. But our essence is the same. We are here to enter more deeply into our teaching and to raise our children to know its ways, as we pursue the path to becoming *am kadosh*, a holy people.