

**Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai 5781**  
**World Union for Progressive Judaism Shabbat Exchange**  
**Temple B'rith Kodesh and Congregation Mevakshei Derech**  
**Rabbi Peter W. Stein**

Shabbat Shalom!

תודה לכולם, במיוחד לרב שלום. אכן מיוחד  
להיות ביחד לקבל את השבת ולהעמיק את הקשר בין  
קהילותינו. אפילו לאורך כל הקילומטרים, אני  
יודע שכולנו חולמים על היום בו נוכל  
להיות ביחד בירושלים.

Thank you to Rabbi Haim Shalom, who has been a generous partner in creating the connection between our congregations. We were able to study together in the days before Rosh HaShana, and I hope that we will continue to find ways to be together in different and important ways.

I have been thinking a lot about the idea of what it means to be together. All through the pandemic, at our services online, we have been singing *Hine Ma Tov*. We might be on zoom, but we are sitting *beyachad*.

One part of togetherness is not just the connection with one another, but the *brit*, the covenantal connection we have with God. In our reading from Torah this Shabbat, we are at the very end of the book of Leviticus. In the portion Bechukotai, we find this description<sup>i</sup>, “*Venatati mishkani betochechem...Vehithalacti betochechem vehayiti lachem IElohim.*”

God declares, “I will establish my mishkan, my home, in your midst...I will always walk with you. I will be your God and you shall be My people.”

The traditional commentaries expand on this beautiful promise. Ibn Ezra<sup>ii</sup> teaches, “Do not fear that you will ever suffer scarcity, for My Presence will reside among you.”

The Bekhor Shor<sup>iii</sup> adds, “I will dwell among you and when you go from place to place, I will go with you.”

Our connection with God will be sustained, from generation to generation and from place to place. We know, however, that this section of the Torah is addressing the Jewish people as they are approaching the end of their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land...*Eretz Yisrael.*

The language about God’s home, *mishkan*, is a reference to the temple that will be built in Jerusalem by King Solomon. The Torah encourages us to see that our destiny is to be at home in Jerusalem and in the land of Israel.

However, even as the Torah paints a picture of a journey that will end in Israel, these verses still teach that God is with us wherever we are and wherever we go. It is this reassurance that we have turned to, I believe, in many ways in the two thousand years since the destruction of the Second Temple.

Abarbanel<sup>iv</sup> points out the seeming contradiction in the verses: the first verse talks about establishing the mishkan, which is a fixed structure, and then about walking with the people. Judaism has been sustained through the centuries by this combination: we can have a home and we can have a relationship that is not limited to a place.

Certainly, in terms of the challenges of the corona era, we can turn to this combination. Through the years, we thrived by building beautiful synagogues and by physically sitting together for Shabbat, holidays, and so many different activities all throughout the week. Our calendar at Temple B'rith Kodesh was filled with dozens of activities in the week, most taking place in the building.

But what we have learned is that we can walk together, outside of the walls of the synagogue building. We can be a caring presence, helping those who are sick, those who are lonely, those are in mourning....by using the phone and computer and other tools. We can be together as boys and girls are called to the Torah as bnai mitzvah, even if the aliyot are recited over zoom by family in a distant city.

We can be together with old and new friends, all the way from Jerusalem to Rochester, welcoming Shabbat and celebrating our common connection.

This combination of fixed place and portable emotional connection is a very important part of American Zionism. A few weeks ago, around Yom HaZikaron and Yom HaAtsmaut, Memorial Day and Independence Day, I had a series of conversations about what it means to be a Zionist.

For some, they were unsure about the term. They thought of Zionists as meaning the conquering power...those who took the land away from the Arabs and who refused to consider Palestinian rights.

For others, they thought of Zionists as those who were born in Israel or those who made Aliyah. How could one be a Zionist if they continued to choose a life outside of the land?

For me, I embrace my Zionist identity. And, I don't think I am unique, in the long and proud history of Temple B'rith Kodesh and in American Reform Judaism.

I would offer four elements of what defines American Progressive Zionism.

One is that Israel provides an anchor to the chain of tradition...a direct connection to our history. B'rith Kodesh is 173 years old and American Judaism is over 350 years old. But nurturing a connection to Israel means that we are part of something that is thousands of years old.

Second, our Zionism allows us to learn and grow from the incredible creativity of the modern state...music, literature, art, Torah scholarship, and the miracle of modern Hebrew, not to mention technology. My own rabbinical studies were built on the foundation of time spent living in Jerusalem and all of us benefit from the composers, artists, authors, poets, scholars and scientists who have been at the center of the state since the time of the first *chalutsim*.

Nothing takes the place of physical connection, and a third key part of our American Zionism is time spent in Israel and also welcoming Israelis who spend time here. In Rochester, we have a very important partnership with the city of Modi'in. We have active exchanges with schoolteachers, teens, young adults, and those in leadership positions. We travel back and forth, helping us grow and learn and be as successful as possible.

One of the most important exchanges is called Journey for Identity, which is a group of Rochester and Modi'in teens spending time together in Rochester, Poland, and Israel.

For the last two years, we have welcomed *shinshinim* to Rochester. Their presence here is transformative in more ways that I can describe right now.

And now we are building on these physical and personal connections with you and with other parts of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. We are united with a shared vision.

One last element of our Zionism is special to being a Reform synagogue. We are able to build partnerships like we are enjoying tonight, and connections with *Nshot HaKotel* (Women of the Wall), the Israel Religious Action Center, and other groups and individuals who share our ideals. We are Zionists because we believe that Israel and Israelis and those who love Israel can join together and can create a state and a world that is filled with equality, justice, and peace.

I share all of this to say: even while we live in Rochester, we are together with you. When there is pain in the land, we feel it. And when there is joy, we are dancing with you. We support and celebrate your work in creating inclusive and innovative Jewish life.

We will board that plane and sit with you as soon as we are able...we actually have a meeting tonight just before our Shabbat begins to discuss planning for our next trip. For now, thanks to the wonders of zoom, I can say: *Hithalachtu betocham...Anachnu holchim im kulchem*. We share your values and celebrate your presence in the heart of Jerusalem. All of us are united in the *brit Kodesh*, the holy covenant that has endured over thousands of years and grows stronger in every corner of the globe.

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>i</sup> Leviticus 26:11-2

<sup>ii</sup> Abraham ibn Ezra, 1089-1164, Spain-Italy-France-England

<sup>iii</sup> Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, 12<sup>th</sup> century, France

<sup>iv</sup> Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1437-1508, Portugal-Spain-Italy