

Balak 5785 Kabbalat Shabbat
July 11, 2025 15 Tammuz 5785
Welcome Back Service

I am so happy to be here with all of you and not to be going anywhere. I am so grateful to you for giving me the gift of a sabbatical. It was a gift of life. You gave me life. You know, the secret is that I kind of didn't want to go. I love being home. I love my own bed, my apartment, my neighborhood, our community. I love the familiar. I didn't entirely want to go be by myself for many months in unfamiliar places. But this congregation, through your board and immediate past president, told me that your commitment was that I not burn out, and therefore I had to take my sabbatical. And I knew you were right.

So we announced it three years before I left, which gave me three years to ask: if the goal is to renew myself, to deeply refresh myself, and I can do anything for six whole months, how can I best use that time to accomplish that goal? I decided that I should be in the wilderness, mostly by myself, listening for G-d, moving my body, breathing fresh air, experiencing beauty, and remembering how small I am in the scheme of things.

I'm very happy to report that that's exactly what I did, and it was exactly what I needed. I have been completely refreshed. After services tonight I'll be offering an old timey slideshow of my adventures, so I won't say more now, except that I have the deepest gratitude from literally every cell of my body, to Rabbi Kolin, Rabbi Green, Cantor Breitzer, Rabbi Traylor, and Cantorial Intern Leslie Goldberg, and our president Leslie Lewin and our executive vice president Matt Baer and our executive committee and board, and our full staff, who stepped into that space in what turned to be the most difficult time any of us could have imagined. Together they led so ably that this congregation is stronger by every measure than it was when I left. One of the best possible outcomes of a sabbatical is that everyone realizes that you don't need the leader. You like having me here — and I'm very glad of that — but you're OK without me — and everyone just saw that. Look how strong you are, CBE.

While away, I was given the gift of distance. I was able to see how young we are as a species — we, human beings — in the context of the magnificent,

multifarious life on this planet. I was able to see how young life on this planet is since the beginning of our universe. I was able to see how small life on this planet is in the context of at least 100 billion galaxies in this universe. Honestly, I was really only able to see how small we are in the context of about 20 or 30 other galaxies that I could see with my naked eye and through a telescope. Still really small.

I was able to see that humanity, this very young species, in this one galaxy among billions, is evolving really quickly toward concepts of dignity, freedom, equality, love, and compassion, alongside big technological leaps, intellectual leaps, psychological and emotional leaps, consciousness leaps. We're growing together across geography — through communication, economy, and migration. We're learning that we're one interdependent living system and as the trees already know and some indigenous peoples already knew, we are better off if we find the right balance of boundaries and sharing, if we care for one another, because we're only as well as the most vulnerable among us. We're learning. And just like children at a big developmental leap, we're regressing for a moment, as happens.

I came home to the vile news of Alligator Alcatraz, the *concentration camp* that this administration has built in the Florida Everglades, right near where I grew up. The 400 detainees are in metal buildings, have not been out at all, are complaining of lack of water, food, showers, the lights on all night and then during the day failing generators which mean no air conditioning which in a metal box in the everglades is very dangerous, and swarms of mosquitos. \$45 billion was just budgeted to build more concentration camps.

I came home to the obscene news of a large piece of legislation passed by Congress and signed by the president, by which at least 10 million of the poorest Americans are likely to lose their health care, and 2 million of the very poorest Americans are likely to lose the food aid they depend on to live.

I came home to the despicable news of starving Gazans being shot at while trying to get food.

These are examples of regression — cruel dehumanization of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the vulnerable. None of these things are unprecedented —

we've been detaining immigrants in this country for a very long time and are used to mass incarceration. We've been playing politics with poverty also for a very long time. We've been using violence where it doesn't belong for a very long time. These are the same things that our Torah and Prophets warned us against 3,000 years ago. But remember, 3,000 years is the blink of an eye. Homo sapiens has been around for 300,000 years. Despite these examples, we're learning really fast.

Times of convulsive change are dangerous for the Jewish people, which means, as we all know, that we must think carefully and act with clarity to keep ourselves and our people safe. And also the Jewish people are made for moments like this. Judaism is made for moments like this.

In our parasha this week, for example, we are migrants. We have escaped from a country where we were oppressed and we are looking to make a new home in a land where we can live freely and work hard to feed our families.

We are migrants. And in this week's parasha we've crossed borders to settle on the plains of Moab, and the king of Moab is trying to curse us in order to remove us.

Now from his perspective, the Moabite king Balak is full of dread because we have just vanquished three neighboring armies and are now his neighbor.

The reason we defeated the other three armies is that when we approached their border peaceably they came out to fight us. First we approached the King of Edom and sent messengers asking if we could simply cross his land. He said no, so we turned around and went all the way around his land. Then the Canaanite king of Arad learned that we were on our way and before we could send messengers came out to attack us, so we fought back and defeated him. Then we sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites. The messengers made it clear we came in peace, asking only if we could pass through the land. We promised that we would stick to the road and not veer off in any direction. We said we would not take any food from anyone's fields and we would not drink water from anyone's wells.

The answer was no. Instead he met us with his army, and we defeated him. The next king, Og of Bashan, also sent his army to meet us, and we fought them and won again. And now King Balak, recognizing that no army can defeat us if we have G-d's blessing — is trying to get the soothsayer Bilaam to curse us so that the Moabite army can send us away.

The outcome is obvious from the start. We've already been trained by Torah to know that all kings who stand against human dignity, starting with Pharaoh, all kings who seek to oppress the stranger, will fall and will fail.

In the end Bilaam blesses us instead of cursing us. But one thing he says in the midst of the blessing doesn't sound like a blessing. He says, "It is a nation dwelling alone, not reckoned among the nations." What does it mean? Rashi interprets it to mean that our people will survive the rise and fall of many other nations. That has turned out to be true. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, drawing from Rabbi Soloveitchik, teaches that while all other nations developed by sharing the same land and their primary bond was defense against other groups or nations, the Jewish people from the Babylonian exile on has developed in different lands, but have been bound together by our Torah. We are unique among nations, being both a religion and a people. We have different languages, different customs, different cultures, different ethnicities. The only thing we all have in common is our Torah.

And that's why we're made for this moment. We are a people who stand for something. We stand for life. We stand for human dignity. We stand for loving the stranger. We stand for the idea that every person is equally in the image of G-d. We stand for the idea that, in that image, humanity is learning, evolving, and becoming more and more of who we're meant to be.

In a moment like this, we rise to that calling with our full lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

