

**Devar Torah on the Occasion of my Installation at Kehillat Beth Israel, Chayei Sarah,
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Many people have asked me what an installation of a rabbi is. And the answer is that I don't really know. I mean, it's not like an installation of a dishwasher—before it was installed, it was useless, and now that it's installed, you hope that it runs properly and cleans your dishes.

In my case, I've been working for KBI for several weeks—breaking a couple of dishes here and there, but generally doing the job of a rabbi. So what are we doing here this weekend?

When I asked AI what an installation of a rabbi means it told me: “The installation of a rabbi is a ceremony that witnesses the rabbi's entry into their sacred office.” And additionally, “‘Install’ means to give a charge to the new rabbi - words of challenge, hope and direction to take.”

Straightforward enough. But notice that there are active roles for multiple parties here. I am the one being installed and charged, as it were, by the Board on behalf of the members, with taking on the challenge of what it means to be the rabbi of this congregation, and in addition to putting their hope and faith in me, they have expressed their desires for the direction that they would like the congregation to take. All of that was communicated in our mutual interviewing process, and we agreed that I am the right person to take on this position. So too, the members present here today are instrumental in this installation process as the witnesses—the eidim—to this official procedure (most of which will take place on Sunday, but which begins today).

Witnessing is no small matter. Indeed, that is our job as Jews. We are eidim, witnesses to God's oneness and we commit ourselves to this every time we recite the Shema—morning and evening. The ayin at the end of the word Shema and the dalet at the end of the verse in the word Echad spell “eid” meaning witness. We then continue in the Shema prayer to enumerate all of the ways that we demonstrate our witnessing to God's

oneness—showing love for God with all our hearts, souls, and material abilities. We witness when we teach “these words” to our children, recite them at home and away, night and day; when we bind them on our hands and between our eyes with our tefillin; and when we inscribe them on our doorposts of our homes in our mezuzzot.

We usually think of witnesses sitting on the witness stand in a court and testifying about something. That is exactly the right metaphor here. We testify to God’s oneness and goodness through our actions in fulfilling the mitzvot/commandments, that God commands us to do. Through those actions we are saying, “Look how great our God is! Our God tells us to do ___(fill in the blank)—visit the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, sanctify a day of rest, etc.”

This weekend, as witnesses to this Installation you are meant to take an active role as well. Not passively witnessing as a spectator but being active witnesses as we do with the mitzvot I already mentioned, and many more; and even in the way that a witness testifies in a court of law by demonstrating the values of this synagogue community through our actions.

So what am I asking you to do? I’m glad you asked.

We’re going to turn to the Torah portion and then come back to the witnessing, so let’s just put a pin in that.

In today’s Torah portion we see another installation of sorts. Isaac marries Rebecca and installs her, so to speak, in his mother Sarah’s tent. The Torah tells us:

וַיְבִיאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלְהָ שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רֵבֶקָה וַתְּהִי־לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּצְאֶהָ וַיָּנַחֶם יִצְחָק אֶת־גֵּרֵי אָמּוֹ:
Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death. (Gen. 24:67)

The Midrash seizes on Isaac taking Rebekah into his mother’s tent and seems to ask why she should merit such an honour. Sarah was this revered leader of women, a prophetess to whom God spoke directly—why should Rebecca merit to take over the place, so to speak, of such a great woman? The Midrash answers, “Three miraculous phenomena that occurred in the tent during Sarah’s lifetime resurfaced when Isaac married Rebecca: the candle remained lit from one Friday to the next, the dough was

blessed and always sufficed for the family and guests, and a Divine cloud “was attached” to the tent.” (Bereishit Rabbah 60:16)

The Israeli scholar Tamar Frankiel suggests in her book, *The Voice of Sarah*, that the fact that with Rebecca now in Sarah’s tent once again Shabbat candles burned from one Shabbat to the next and fresh challah was always on the table is not meant to convey their devotion to homemaking, but rather it points to the miracles that resulted from their inherent holiness. Rebecca, in other words, was equal in holiness to Sarah.

Frankiel notes how the midrash in Bereishit Rabbah identifies the Temple in Jerusalem with these characteristics of Sarah’s and Rebekah’s tents: In the Temple a fire always burned on the altar (represented now by the *Ner Tamid*, the eternal light, found in most synagogue sanctuaries. Some say it’s linked to the ancient Menorah), and the 12 loaves of bread that were continuously on display, the *Lechem Hapanim*, was always fresh and warm. And, just as during her lifetime Sarah’s tent was always graced with a Divine cloud, so too was the Mishkan (tabernacle), the portable desert sanctuary.

Frankiel concludes: “The implication is that the holiness of Sarah’s life was like that of the Temple itself, and that [Rebecca] echoed her in every way.”

It’s not just that the holiness of Sarah’s life was equal in measure to the holiness of the Temple. This is not a one-to-one comparison. Rather, when faced with the task of building a home for God, it was Sarah’s home that God used as a blueprint. That blows my mind! Sarah’s home—the home of a woman—was the basis that God used when designing the Temple—God’s own future dwelling place on earth.

The tent was just an empty tent until one of these special women occupied it. I am not comparing myself to Sarah or to Rebecca, God forbid. (My challah is pretty good, but it goes mouldy if not eaten by the next Shabbat.) What I am saying is that just as the tent was just a canvas structure until it was filled with the *neshamah* (the good soul) of Sarah or Rebecca, so too, a synagogue is just a building until it is filled with the people who make it a holy community. And that’s where you, the witnesses, come in.

When a synagogue is filled with people who care about it and want to see it grow and succeed—and they actively do the right things, then it becomes a place of divine presence.

As witnesses to this installation, that is what we are all called to do together. To witness through our actions that this is a holy community, one filled with special people who make it holy; one filled with Torah, prayer, and good deeds; one filled with joy and wonder; filled with good will and reaching out to one another in support and friendship.

That is the kehillah kedoshah—the holy community—that I have the honour of fostering here at KBI, but that can only be done with active witnesses testifying to its kedushah, its holiness. And just as we testify to God’s oneness through the way we respond to God’s commandments, so too, we testify to the goodness and holiness of this place through our actions inside and outside of the synagogue.

We are going to create a place of meaning and holiness—where people want to come for prayer and study, for community and connection; where people feel valued because when we see a new face, we introduce ourselves and get to know each other; where people are not judged for lack of knowledge or experience, but are embraced and supported in deepening their Jewish connections; where Jews and their families—whether Jewish or not—are comfortable celebrating and mourning, questioning and exploring; and where people of all genders and gender expressions are free to be who they are, love who they love, and love Israel openly and freely.

I need your help to do that—your active witnessing to this mission that we share. And I need us all to commit ourselves to stretching out of our comfort zones; to push ourselves to try new things—myself included, or rather to try the same things in new ways, and never to say, “we’ve always done it this way so we can’t change,” or “we’ve already tried that and it didn’t work.” We are each going to have different assumptions, and perhaps different approaches to similar processes or rituals. And that’s okay. Because we are going to learn from one another, respect our differing points of view, come to an understanding, try new things, and move forward together in partnership. You didn’t engage me as your rabbi to step in and do everything the same way it’s always been done. Not all of those

things have worked the best that they can. (That's normal in every community.) You engaged me to question the status quo, focus on our core values, and bring everything into line so that we are living up to our ideals and our goals of being the warm, embracing, comfortable, supportive, big tent community that KBI strives to be.

It's going to be hard work, and it's going to be slow work—changes take time and *ought* to take their time. But it's going to be good work, because it is meaningful work. And it's going to be fun. Because good, meaningful work cannot make us miserable. It must be uplifting and energising. We are going to be serious in our work, but we are not going to take ourselves too seriously. And we are going to celebrate our successes at every point along the way, because I am sure there will be many.

I look forward to filling our tent with holiness together with you. I look forward to helping you shape this community to achieve its full potential. And when we do, we will look ahead to the next goal and milestone because this type of holy work is never done.

I feel so blessed to have this opportunity to join this holy community and help to usher it through to the next stage—one of strength, inclusion, and holiness. Thank you for being active witnesses in this process. May we go together from strength to strength.

Amen.