

## NEW MEMBERS SABBATH 10/29/99

### PARASHAT VAYERA

Some of you may have noticed that I made it all the way to Oct. 29 this year without talking about the Yankees. You may even have been hoping that I would make it all the way to next year without talking about the Yankees, especially if you are a Mets or Braves fan. But this week my self-restraint disappeared once I realized that the Yankees have something to teach us about welcoming new members to the Center. It has to do with Roger Clemens and the way he reacted after pitching a great final game in the Yankees sweep of the Braves. For those of you who don't know, Roger Clemens is a great pitcher. He's a 5 time Cy Young Award winner; but until Wednesday night, he had never won a World Series ring. After he had joined the Yankees this year, he watched from the dugout as his new teammates received their 1998 World Series rings. His teammates came back into the dugout after the ceremony and said to Clemens, "We're gonna get you one this year." And they did. And when it was all over and the celebrating had begun, Roger Clemens said: "I feel blessed to be part of this team. Tonight I know what it feels like to be a Yankee." Roger Clemens played in Yankee Pinstripes all season. Why didn't he know what it felt like to be a Yankee before Wednesday night; and what was it that made the difference? That's the part I want to talk about tonight: what makes people feel like they really belong.

There are actually two places in the Torah portion which teach us about belonging. One is a negative example derived from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. People have always wondered what could have been so evil about these two cities that they deserved to be destroyed so completely. The rabbis tell us it is because the people of Sodom said, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours." They were hoarders. When Abraham's nephew Lot moved into the city, they welcomed him because he was wealthy and they thought it would be an advantage to have him as a neighbor. But they turned away beggars and poor people. The Midrash spins a tale about a poor man who came into Sodom. One young woman was kind to him and shared her money. When the people heard this, they attacked her. They believed that helping the poor would set a bad precedent because even more poor people would move to town. They believed that if people shared, they would have less. What we know, of course, is that people who share end up with more.

We find the other model for belonging in this week's story in the way Abraham and Sarah greeted the three strangers. The rabbis said that it is also the way of the righteous to say "What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" if they are looking to share their wealth. We are told that Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day just to be ready to welcome a wayfarer. He and Sarah sought out the

strangers, rushed to make a fine meal for them, washed their feet, watered their camels - and all without knowing who they were. We are told that from their generosity we derive the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming the stranger, one of the mitzvot which the Mishnah calls "an obligation without measure whose reward too is without measure."

So we can learn about the first stages of belonging from the Torah; we can learn about the continuing relationship from our families. The family is really the first group which teaches us about belonging. It shapes the way we belong to groups forever afterwards, whether it's a congregation or girl scouts or the Yankees or Men's Club or Rosh Hodesh groups. People join families initially the way Roger Clemens joined the Yankees and the way the three messengers arrived at the tent of Abraham and Sarah: they just show up. If they're lucky, the newcomers are greeted with welcome and love. But as important as that initial feeling of greeting can be, it isn't enough in the long run to feel a sense of belonging; it's too one-sided just to feel loved. At some point, a baby gets to be old enough to understand expectations and reciprocation. To be part of a family, you can't just receive love; you have to learn how to give it. There's another religious model for this experience: When the Jewish people left Egypt, they were like babies who only knew how to be loved. It wasn't until they reached Sinai and agreed to accept God's Torah that they learned to love in return.

When Roger Clemens first joined the Yankees, they welcomed him. But he couldn't yet feel like a real Yankee because he didn't know them yet and couldn't reciprocate their welcome. He didn't yet know how to celebrate and grieve with them, how to resolve conflict, how to be with them. And there was a lot of grieving on the Yankees this year. He had to know them; then he would know what they needed. "Do you love me?" asks one friend of the other in an hasidic story. "Yes," the friend answers. The first friend asks again: "Do you know what hurts me?" The second friend replies, "No." And the first says again: "Then how can you love me if you don't know what hurts me." Roger Clemens had to contribute himself before he could feel a part of the family. The analogy with temple membership breaks down at a certain point, of course. Roger Clemens could get traded right out of that Yankee family; once you become a member of the Center, we promise never to trade you. But where the analogy holds up is what you have to do so that you can finally say, "Now I know what it feels like to be a member." Filling out the paperwork and sending a check is the starting point but it doesn't make people feel like members. What makes them feel like members is when they begin to know people, celebrate and grieve. They learn what to contribute of themselves so they can feel like they're giving back to the community. It's important for the community to make the new members feel welcome

because without that, no one would want to become more involved; then the knowing can begin.

Our new members do us a big favor; their presence makes the old members think again about what membership means to them. It is an opportunity not just to welcome new members but also to reevaluate your own way of being a member; do you get that feeling that you really are one - or are you more like Roger Clemens at the beginning of the season, still tentative and waiting for an opportunity. It's way too easy to take membership for granted, just as it's way too easy to take for granted that the Yankees are going to keep winning world series. Jim Bouton, the old Yankees pitcher, was quoted on the radio yesterday as saying, "The Yankees aren't a team; they're a novel." If you ask me, I think they're a Bible story. But however you think of them, we want all of our members to be able to say like Roger Clemens, "I feel blessed to be a part of this Center. Tonight I know what it feels like to belong."

Ken yehi ratzon - May it be God's will.