At the Gates — בַּשְׁעַרְיָם

“Enlarge the size of your tent, extend the size of your dwelling, do not stint! Lengthen the ropes, and drive the pegs firm.” Thus does Isaiah (in 54:2) rally his countrymen after the Babylonian conquest. His metaphoric tent and pegs derive from both earthy Israelite experience and Torah descriptions of the Tabernacle. From desert encampments to the Tabernacle to the Temple to synagogues throughout Jewish space and time, and in our time to the diverse places where Jews and those who share their lives come together to “do Jewish”—this is the shalshelet of our people’s gathering places. From the beginning to now, the central challenge has remained the same: How to encompass and include while maintaining a central core. How to be flexible but firm, both confident and realistic. How to achieve unity of purposeful commitment while also acknowledging one another as distinct individuals.

Back in 1984, studying at HUC-NY, I encountered an unusual sort of article that remained in my consciousness over the years: Lawrence Kushner’s “The Tent Peg Business.” It turned out that it wasn’t only me who vibrated with this piece and kept referring back to it. Over time, it became a classic. And so it’s wonderful that this issue of the Journal includes an update of “Tent Pegs” as the cooperative venture of two Kushner rabbis, Larry and his daughter Noa.

Several other pieces also consider various roles of the synagogue and/or rabbis: David Whiman’s article “Synagogue Work Will Drive You Crazy” and Joel Wolowelsky’s “Yom HaAtzma-ut as a Religious Holiday,” as well as Elliot Gertel’s book review essay “A Congregation, a Rabbi, and a Religious Movement.” To these is added an important cluster of articles on “Progressive Judaism Around the World: Paradigms of Peoplehood,” guest edited by Larry Englander. Larry believes that our sense of Jewish Peoplehood is the crucial factor in understanding the panorama of Reform Jewry around the world. His knowledge of and devotion to both Israeli and Diaspora Jewish life have enabled him to make major contributions to his congregation, the CCAR, this publication, and the Jewish People.
In balance, as it were, to this interesting range of professionally oriented articles come a number of pieces that focus on biblical texts. Daniel Berry, whom you may remember as the co-author of the Spring 2012 piece “Why Jews Wear Costumes on Purim,” tackles the “Two Creation Narratives.” Sefer B’reishit also draws the attention of Michael Oblath in his “The Garden of Eden: Peeling Back the Layers.” Mordecai Roshwald brings us “The Binding of Isaac (A Different Version).” And David Zucker presents “Throw-away Women: Ruth as Response.” After you read David’s article, be sure to turn to his review of The JPS Bible Commentary—Ruth.

To these riches, add the fifth piece to appear under our still-new Maayanot (Primary Sources) rubric. In it, our teacher Stephen Pассamaneck examines the Laws of M’sirah in Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, Chapter 388. Just a few months ago, Steve fully retired after fifty years of teaching at the College-Institute. We wish him continuing vigor and acuity during this stage of his life.

And finally, this issue features seven fine poems. That the Journal has long (perhaps since its beginnings) included poetry gives me a pride and pleasure that is undoubtedly shared by many of you. On that basis, I will take the liberty of ending this column with a lesser-known but, to my mind, very great poem by Robert Frost: “The Silken Tent.” Its central image rounds back to the Isaiah verses with which I began while encoding a deep spirituality.

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one’s going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

Susan Laemmle, Editor