

According to tradition, when the Hebrew slaves stood in front of the Sea of Reeds, with Pharaoh and his army charging toward them, there was a moment of hesitation. Moses had yet to raise his staff and no clear pathway lay ahead. After hundreds of years of suffering, freedom seemed so very far away. Doom and destruction filled their minds.

Standing in the front row, one person, and one person alone decided to move forward. That person was not Moses, not Miriam, not Aaron, but a lowly Hebrew slave with barely a mention anywhere else in tradition. His name was Nachshon and with blind courage and without guidance from God he took a step out into the murky blue waters of the sea and began to walk.

Of course, we know what happened next. Long before Cecil B. Demille and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hollywood productions, our people had special effects. The sea, according to Midrash rising as high as a mountain, able to be spotted from halfway around the world, and, thus beginning, a forty-year Exodus through a harsh wilderness into the open arms of the Promised Land.

There was a moment this year where I could picture this Biblical scene exactly as if it were happening in front of my very own eyes. It was a moment where I understood the daunting nature of change, and where I felt myself and our community being pulled by Nachon's first step into the great and holy unknown.

It happened on July 1<sup>st</sup>, the day of our Torah walk, a two and a half mile trek from Temple Sinai on 50 Alberta Drive, across the mighty Ellicot Creek, all the way to 4660 Sheridan Drive. This would be an ambitious opening act for our new community, and one that almost never happened.

Truthfully, I was the one who got cold feet. After proposing the idea to the board in March of this past year, I began to reassess the situation. What if it rained? What if it was too hot? Who would be there to carry the Torahs such a long way? How could we possibly make this work? Maybe, we could just drive the Torahs over. It would be easier that way. Our Torahs would be safe and no one will get hurt in the process.

But, when I brought this back to the board of both communities, there was overwhelming support to go on as planned.

And, then the day came, and while the forecasters spoke of rain in the late afternoon, the morning was clear. When I arrived at Temple Sinai at 11 AM there was not just a handful of people, but almost one hundred. Not just legacy Sinai members, but legacy Beth Am members, and general community members.

Together, we took out the Torahs, reading from them for the very last time at Temple Sinai, and then, opening up a *chupah*, a wedding canopy, began the walk down Longmeadow, up Millersport, and over to Sheridan Drive, where we would march, singing and dancing, young and old, founding members and new recruits, to a new reality that is Congregation Shir Shalom.

Along the way, I heard ringing in my ears. Not from Pharaoh and his chariots, who were no where in sight, or from the crashing waters of the Sea of Reeds half-way across the world, but, from Miriam's tambourine, celebrating the joy of new found freedom, and celebrating the hard work of so many that went into making this day a possibility.

We never speak about the Exodus from Egypt as a synagogue merger, but in many ways it was: twelve tribes becoming one nation, the children of Jacob, becoming the children of Israel. In reading the Torah, we glance over how complicated it must have been to have made the transition from slave to free people, from a mixed multitude, to a unified people.

In Alice Mann's "The In-Between Church" she writes: "Despite the clear vision of God's purposes given to Moses, the people were frequently confused, frightened, and angry. The experience of slavery had been oppressive but predictable. Life in the wilderness, on the other hand, was terribly uncertain. Food and water were often in doubt, and they were crossing through the territory of alien peoples. Every new circumstance demanded of them a radical trust in God and a profound cooperation with their leaders."

Through the Alban's Institute, a church think-tank out of Hendon, Virginia, Mann helps lead many religious communities, including synagogues, through size changes and mergers. She puts into perspective the next leg of our journey in the following way: "In biblical terms we might contrast the exodus with the journey in the wilderness. One could say that crossing the sea on dry land was essentially technical work." "God empowered Moses with sufficient expertise to name the injustice, direct the departure from Egypt, and remove the obstacles. The people were not required to much more than walk. But at the moment they left the chariots behind in the mud, 40 years of adaptive work began."

Adaptive work is a term coined by Ronald Heifetz in his book "Leadership Without Easy Answers." By adaptive work, Heifetz means work that requires learning, and change.

As we turn from the shores of Egypt to wilderness Sinai, we know our journey will not be easy. Luckily, we have our the experience of our Biblical ancestors to inspire us along the way.

To help out, I have compiled the five primary lessons our biblical ancestors provided us for the road ahead.

### It will be different

The moment the Israelites crossed over the sea, they quickly realized they could never go back. Everything they ever knew in their life prior to that day was but a memory. True, they were now free people. But that did not mean they did not miss slavery. Despite all of the hardships, slavery provided security and certainty in their lives.

As they say to Moses later in the Torah: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread!"

Going into the wilderness, meant starting over again. While, we here at Shir Shalom, have not come through slavery, we too are starting over. It is natural to miss our former synagogue communities. Even as the staff and board have gone out of their way to make your experience as familiar as possible, we know it is going to be inevitably different.

To the legacy Temple Beth Am members who have gone out of their ways to make legacy Temple Sinai members feel at home. It is much appreciated. And, to legacy Temple Sinai members who have worked hard to adjust to new surroundings, that too is very much appreciated.

### It will affect everyone differently

The first concern of the newly merged Israelite community had, of course, involved their stomachs. As they struggled to survive in a new surrounding, they were desperate for good water to drink, and healthy food to eat. Out of this came the miracle of the Manna - dew that would arrive every morning, and twice on Friday.

Manna was tasty, filling and even flexible. According to the rabbis, the real miracle of the Manna was that it could take the form and texture of any food imaginable. So, with each Israelite desiring a different delicacy, the manna allowed them to experience the meat and fish, vegetables and fruits, that they longed for, probably the same ones they were missing from their lives in Egypt.

Each of us will feel the pang of loss differently. For some of us, whether it's the tone and tenor of the rabbi's sermon, the voice of the cantor, the sound of the organ, or even maybe the layout of the room. Grief will hit

us in different ways and different times as we struggle to make what is now unfamiliar, familiar.

### It Is Okay to Complain

Kvetching, as I told the Temple Sinai members last year, is part of our DNA. It took exactly three verses between the time Miriam put down her tambourine and the time the newly formed Israelite community lodged its first complaint. So, began the tradition of murmuring, something that continued throughout our journey to the Promised Land.

It is okay to feel unhappy about different aspects of our new community. Please do not be afraid to share your thoughts with our office, our board, with me or anyone else on the *bimah* tonight. I cannot guarantee we will be able fix the problem, but I can guarantee we will take you seriously.

### It requires everyone

In the immediate aftermath of the crossing of the sea, Moses was visited by his father-in-law Jethro. Jethro saw how the people lined up around Moses at all hours of the day and night. “What is this thing you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone?” Jethro suggested a system where tribal leaders are appointed to head groups of one hundred, fifty and ten. His message clear – Moses could not do it by himself.

To make our merger work, leadership will have to be extended beyond our staff and board. We need as many people involved as possible. There are many ways to pitch in: Board and committee meetings, community gatherings, service participation, Bingo night, or during any of the many activities on the Shir Shalom calendar. Every little bit helps.

I, personally, have been so appreciative of the many, many congregants who have come in over the past three months to help with the project of building Congregation Shir Shalom.

I am hopeful this energy will continue to grow as we move forward into a new year. You are all welcome to join in. It may even be fun.

### It Takes Time

There is a reason that it took forty years to make it to the Promised Land. The people were simply not ready to function as one until they had been through the trials and tribulations of the wilderness. We know that melding two communities into one will not occur overnight. Just getting used to our new name will take time. I can promise you this, each year it

will be a little easier. The legacies of Temple Beth Am and Temple Sinai have not been forgotten. They will always be with us.

Eventually, though, in a few years time, we will forget who came to us from one community or another, and instead feel apart of one cohesive community, that is Shir Shalom.

As we begin the year 5773 on the Jewish calendar I know we are a stronger, more vibrant community than we were at the beginning of 5772. While synagogues in Buffalo face real demographic and financial challenges, I believe our future is bright. I hope you feel emboldened by all that went into the creation of Congregation Shir Shalom. I hope the energy of our newly formed community helps inspire you in your daily lives, and gives you strength to make the changes, big and small, that you face in your own lives.

May we move from strength to strength into the year ahead.

A Shanah Tovah U'Metukah – A sweet and good year for all of us and to all of Israel.