

Yom Kippur 5781

The Journey Has Already Begun

Rabbi Daniel J. Fellman

Temple Concord

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L'Shana Tova.

I begin with an invitation. Come with me into the wilderness. I cannot promise an easy trip, but I can guarantee it will be life-changing. We will face adversity for sure, but we will also learn more about ourselves and each other than any of us could possibly imagine. So, pack a bag, and come with me.

Imagine we have traveled back about 3500 years. Yes, unfortunately, none of us has a cell phone anymore, so no texting or pictures. But we are together. We have arrived in a strange new place. We are in the wilderness. We are free. We join with our ancestors. We are all alone, but we are united as a people.

When we arrive at our first destination on our little voyage, our ancestors are already encamped. They have survived a harrowing night-time journey from slavery to freedom. They crossed the sea, watching as their pursuers drowned in the waters. They stood together at a mountain, accepted a new way of life and a new set of laws, and they voiced their faith in each other and in Something far more powerful.

At the moment that we arrived, our ancestors were doing pretty well. They knew their destination, or at least had an idea of where they were headed. They knew that it would be a bit of a journey, but nothing too long or treacherous. They were modestly hopeful, looking to build a new way of life and a new future. Still they were alone. They had each other, but they were alone.

What seemed like a short and easy journey, one filled with cautious optimism, soon changed. Instead of a relatively quick voyage, theirs turned into a long, grueling, 40-year odyssey filled with twists and turns. Every person who made it out of Egypt

would not make it into the Promised Land. Change and challenge were the only constants.

Our Torah spends chapters describing this journey we have joined. It is, after all, the Exodus journey, our people's voyage from slavery to freedom, the story of our ancestors' path to maturity and understanding.

The story of our journey, b'midbar, in the wilderness, becomes one of the defining elements of our peoplehood. And while we have all read and learned about this journey, and while we celebrate the beginning of the journey at the Passover Seder each year, few if any of us recognize that the journey never really ended. In fact, as we join together on this Yom Hakipurim, let us acknowledge this truth: We are all still in the wilderness. We did not really take a voyage just minutes ago. Instead, we recognized a key element of our identity as Jews. We live b'midbar, in the wilderness.

Our existence in the wilderness can be understood in many ways, some not even connected to our Jewish identity. Look around our nation today, see the struggles for equality and freedom, the growing battles over racism and hatred, the continuing difficulties with a world-wide pandemic and our wilderness-dwelling becomes clear.

Look at our existence as Temple Concord, leaving one home, with a temporary shelter in place but not yet having permanent plans and see that as a congregation, we are living b'midbar, in the wilderness.

And if we each hold up a mirror, we will see that each of us, as we wrestle with the issues of the day, are dwelling in a wilderness, alone but free, having broken off the shackles but not yet fulfilled the bounty of the Promised Land.

Our national wilderness contains many of the same obstacles present for our ancestors long ago. But thankfully for us, our national wilderness also contains an overabundance of resources to help us. At Rosh Hashanah services we began with gratitude, explored what the pandemic means for each of us, and confronted the fear so present for so many. Last night we confronted the challenges of hate. And now, today, we recognize the wilderness in which we all live.

Throughout the Exodus journey, we read of calamities that befell our people. Water evaporated, other nations attacked, many of our people rebelled. Each of these obstacles caused temporary discord, and each in their own time, led to discovery. So too with our pandemic-gripped nation. We have felt restricted, limited, at risk. Just as our ancestors learned, these problems will be short-term. We will learn from them, we will grow from them.

The rise of hate and racism finds parallels in the Exodus journey as well. Whether it was the Amalekites or the Edomites or the Moabites, our ancestors encountered peoples who were overcome with fear. They reacted to our people with hate and violence, so much so that, at least in the case of the Amalekites, we are told to obliterate them and remember their evil in every generation. We learned as a people that fear would only lead to evil, and that we as a people must look for the good in others. How necessary that wilderness lesson remains.

As a Temple, we find ourselves in the midst of a very real journey in the wilderness. Just over a year ago, our congregation voted overwhelmingly to sell our building. We knew that the future was calling, that we needed to make changes. But like our ancestors, we knew not what we would encounter. Who could have imagined a pandemic that would displace us from our beloved sanctuary? Yet even with the upheaval, we have forged new and stronger bonds among us.

I am fairly certain that along the journey from Madison Street to our new promised land, our leaders, like Moses of old, will face their share of 'stiff-necked' people. And I am equally certain that we will develop new understandings of who we are and of our holiness as a community. Like that of our ancestors, our journey will have detours and delays. And I pray that just like our ancestors, we will someday, please God let it be less than 40 years from now, stand gazing at our new home, filled with pride and hope and joy just as our ancestors felt when they stood on the East bank of the Jordan River looking out at the Promised Land.

Throughout the Exodus saga, Torah vacillates between telling the stories of our people and the stories of particular individuals and events. Those traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land must have felt the power and glory of the collective. At times they

must have also felt loneliness as they missed the things they had known before the journey. So too with us.

As we make our way in this journey, we too will learn to bask in the beauty of community. In fact, in many ways, we are already doing this! Though the pandemic has left too many of us isolated, technology and the efforts of so many have allowed us to feel the connections we need. In our wilderness we have been aided by zoom and Facebook, by nightly meet-ups during the Omer and Elul, and by regular phone calls and even socially-distant masked gatherings.

On a deeper level, we are learning to trust ourselves more, and we are learning to trust each other more. We are seeing that we can persevere, we can handle a world-wide pandemic. And we can find ways of bringing blessings to each other and to ourselves as we travel this new wilderness.

Later this afternoon we will read a special section of Torah from the book of Leviticus known as the holiness code. We will read K'doshim T'hiyu, you shall be holy, for I Adonai am holy. This call to holiness reminds our people in the wilderness that they are held to a higher standard, that they report to a Higher Authority. More, the command to be holy is given to all of us, the whole people of Israel.

Each of us contains holiness. Each of us reflects the beauty and exquisiteness of the Almighty. Each of us has something to give, something to share, something to make life better for another. The sooner we comprehend that holiness, the sooner we can begin to enjoy it.

The command to be holy will guide us through our current wilderness. When we recognize the holiness in ourselves, when we celebrate the holiness in each other and in our community, we, in essence, begin to tame the wilderness. These months of separation, of seeing each other in little boxes on a screen have taught us to explore more, to connect more, to rejoice more. We have found holiness in connecting with each other, we have found holiness in connecting to a community, and we are finding holiness in healing a country.

Our identity as wilderness travelers can be a source for fear or a source for holiness. And if you are worried about making that first step on the journey, don't fret, because the journey has already begun. Now it's our turn, our time to embrace the good that the journey can produce and build for ourselves and our offspring the Promised Land of our dreams.

Join me in choosing holiness. Together we will make this journey, together we will create and re-create the community we need, and together we will bring to ourselves, to each other, to our community and our nation a much-needed dose of sanctity, bringing with it understanding, wisdom, hope and love.