

“You won’t really know what it’s like until you get there.”

CESJDS Shabbat

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I am obviously *not* Rabbi Malkus, the Head of School at JDS! Knowing that this was going to be a bitterly cold morning, and knowing that he lives about a two mile walk from here, I was worried about him making that trek here today. He really anguished over it, and in the end decided that he would come back another time and spend Shabbat at Har Shalom. So that means you’re left with me! I thought I’d get the weekend off, but in this business you’ve got to be ready for anything! I have no idea what Rabbi Malkus planned to say today, but if I were the head of a Jewish day school, and as a parent of three Jewish day school kids, there was an episode in the parasha that really grabbed me.

Last week I spoke to you about how Moses ‘bends the truth’ in trying to convince Pharaoh to let *b’nai Yisrael* leave Egypt ***in order to worship God in the wilderness***. First of all, there’s no worship in the wilderness. Moses offers this as an desperate excuse to convince Pharaoh to let the people leave Egypt, seemingly temporarily, to discharge this made-up religious obligation. Of course what Moses doesn’t mention to Pharaoh is that after they celebrate this alleged wilderness festival ***they are never coming back to Egypt!*** And Moses repeats this ploy over and over throughout the plague sequence. What I suggested last week is that in situations of powerlessness, when it’s a matter of life and death, you save innocent lives in any way possible, even if it means bending the truth or even being downright dishonest.

In this week’s episode Moses makes the audacious demand that not only will the Israelites have to bring all their animals with them when they go into the wilderness to worship God, but that Pharaoh will also have to supply them animals for this *Chag Hashem*, this festival of God. Again, there is no real festival. The flocks and herds are meant to sustain the Jewish people in the desert, to provide food and milk, to carry heavy loads, and other necessary resources in the wilderness. But again, this is all part of the ruse. Pharaoh says, ‘Are you kidding me? You want me to release the Israelite slaves, and all their animals, and give you my animals so that you can go worship a God I don’t even believe in and refuse to obey?!’

That’s right says Moses. And here’s the part that grabbed me. Moses explains to Pharaoh that the reason they need all these flocks and herds of animals is: *Anachnu lo neida mah na’avod et Hashem ad-boeinu shama*, meaning, we won’t know exactly how to worship God, we won’t know what this festival, this experience will be like until we get there.¹ *Lo neida mah na’avod...ad bo’einu shama*. We won’t really know what it’s going to be like until we get there.

Our the classical commentators, Rashi, Ibn Ezra and others understand that what Moses is saying to Pharaoh is very matter of fact: ‘Look, I don’t know how many animals God is going to require us to sacrifice until we get to that location in the wilderness where this festival is going to take place. Therefore, I have to bring as many animals as possible, in case God requires some massive number of offerings from us.’ Of course, in typical Pharaoh-fashion, he refuses to let the people or their animals go.

¹ Exodus 10:26

As a rabbi, and really more importantly, as a day school parent myself, a JDS parent in fact, I am drawn to this idea of the people having an abundance of resources with which to go off into uncharted territory. For four of you here today, you will reach that uncharted territory later this year. It's called "college." I know that some of you have decided where you're going already, and others of you haven't yet. Some of you here today have several years before you have to think about this. But whenever and wherever it is that you land after graduating from JDS, *Lo neidah mah na'avod...ad bo'einu shama*. You don't really know what it's going to be like until you get there. I know the seniors here have taken campus tours, bought sweatshirts and swag; maybe you've found your roommates already or know what dorm you want to live in. It's all so exciting! I tell my kids that if I could repeat one part of my life again, if I could have one do-over, it would be the college years. There's just so much to learn, to explore; I remember the thrill of being independent, of picking classes and a major that I was interested in, of meeting new friends; even deciding when I was going to eat, sleep, study, play without anyone else looking over my shoulder. It was so exhilarating!

And, it was also amazing to decide all on my own, for the very first time in my life, what kind of Jew I was going to be. College was a time of incredible religious experimentation...with Shabbat, kashrut, davening, Israel advocacy; Hillel, Chabad. I learned, for example, at Shabbat dinner at Hillel that there was more than just one paragraph in *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace After Meals! Prior to that...at the JCC camps I went to and the youth groups I attended, I only knew about the first paragraph! In college I met Jews of all different backgrounds, and that helped me figure out what I wanted and needed out of Jewish life. In my junior year, I moved into an off campus apartment with a good friend who was raised even less religious than I was. We decided that we were going to experiment with keeping kosher...which neither of us grew up with. We made lots of mistakes and *treifed* up lots of dishes, but we sure learned a lot along the way. Today he is a black-hat, Orthodox Jew who lives in St. Louis and sends his kids to Baltimore for school. That too can happen in college!

The equivalent of bringing every conceivable animal into the wilderness because the Israelites didn't really know what they would need is 'bringing' your Jewish day school education with you into the next chapter of your lives. All of the learning you've done, the travels, the *Shabbatonim*, Hebrew language, Jewish text, prayer, Zionism, Israel; celebrating holidays together, learning the beautiful traditions and ethical foundations of our people...you are taking all these 'flocks and herds' that are our people's deep wisdom with you along all your journeys and travels ahead. In fact it will be much less of a wilderness for you than it was, say, for me...much more familiar territory, because of the gift of a Jewish day school education that your parents are sending you off with. There will be challenges along the way. You'll meet people who have never seen a Jew before; you'll encounter people who say things about Israel that may be upsetting; you may be approached by people who want to convert you to their religion or who may try to influence you to make Judaism less of a priority. I pray that what you have learned here will make you strong and proud of who you are and where you come from. I hope your day school education will give you the tools to articulate your Jewish beliefs in a way that is respectful of others, and that creates greater understanding and peace in the world. Most of all, I hope that *lo neida mah na'avod...ad bo'einu shama*, the sense of not really knowing what it's going to be like until you get there, is something that makes you excited rather than intimidated, hopeful rather than fearful, happy rather than anxious, and prepared rather than vulnerable as you go forth into the world. You have it all! You've got all the flocks and the herds you could

possibly need! You've got the knowledge and the experience! You've got the training and the resources to take the next step in your lives as Jewish adults!

I know that if Rabbi Malkus were here he would tell you how proud he is of every single one of you...and I am so proud of you as well: For all you've accomplished, and for all you have yet to accomplish. Y'shar kochechem to everyone who is participating in services today. And y'shar kochachem to all of your parents who have made the investment and commitment to your Jewish education. It's no secret that Jewish day school education is not cheap, and that sometimes people have to make sacrifices in other parts of their lives in order for this to be a priority. I hope that sometime between right now and when you eventually graduate from JDS, you turn to your parents and just say 'thank you.' Thank you for giving me this invaluable gift of a Jewish education. Thank you for whatever sacrifices you've made, whatever you've had to put on hold or forgo so that I could have this precious experience. I one last thing, I thank you all for being such active, precious members of our Har Shalom community.

Shabbat Shalom