Dear Friends,

I have been thinking lately of a Chelm story, a favorite of mine that many of you have likely heard before. Chelm is a fanciful town full of foolish-wise people, and generations have delighted in the silliness and (occasionally) surprising insight of the characters in these stories. In this one particular story, a man has grown dissatisfied with his life—his profession, his home, his family, his wife, even the town of Chelm. He wakes up grumbling, he goes to bed grumbling. One Shabbat, this dissatisfied man perks up as he listens to the rabbi’s sermon, which talks about Paradise. “Someday,” the rabbi exclaims while pointing into the distance, “We will all go to Paradise! And there we shall be happy for eternity!” That night in bed, the disgruntled man tossed and turned and couldn’t sleep a wink, so dissatisfied was he. Then he remembered the rabbi’s sermon.

The rabbi had pointed into the distance, past the mountains on the edge of the town, right? That must be where Paradise is! In the morning he put his shoes on his feet and his cloak on his shoulders and he set out. He walked and walked, eventually reaching the mountains and then he began to climb. Hours passed, morning turned into afternoon and finally into night as he reached the summit of the mountain. Before falling asleep he took off his shoes and set them down, pointing in the direction he had been travelling. In the morning he would put his shoes on and know which direction to go and continue his journey to reach Paradise. Overnight an angel of the mountain passed by and—laughing to itself—decided to play a bit of a trick on this hapless man with his shoes pointing to Paradise. And the angel turned the shoes around.

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Rabbi, from page 1 — pointing not toward Paradise but back in the direction of that silly town of Chelm. The man woke in the morning, energized, put his shoes on and walked in the direction they had been pointing.

Down the mountain came the man and while the path looked a little familiar, didn’t all trails on mountains look pretty similar? And then the path wound down out of the mountains and turned into a road. And that road led to a town and through a town that, surprisingly, felt familiar as well. The people in the town called out to him by name, but it didn’t surprise the man because of course the angels of Paradise would know his name!

Finally, he came to an old wooden gate and he exclaimed, “This must be the entrance to Paradise!” It was interesting that it wasn’t made of gold or jewels but just out of some run-down looking wood. And as he lifted the latch and stepped into the yard past it, he realized that the yard in Paradise looked - incredibly - like his own yard back in Chelm! The door to the house in Paradise looked so familiar too, just like the door to his own house. The smells of food and drinks served to him in Paradise (by a woman who looked surprisingly like his own wife back in Chelm!) were delicious and he ate everything placed before him. Two sweet children came and gave him hugs and kisses and smiled at him. These children in Paradise were so kind and friendly that he sighed with delight. Yes, he thought, Paradise was absolutely perfect.

Coming out of these last 16 months, I have been feeling like we have a lot in common with the man at the end of that Chelm story. No matter our complaints or gripes or dissatisfactions with the vicissitudes of the day to day, we stepped out of the normal for a journey and are now returning to a sort of “normal” again. The simple little things – sharing food with dear friends, hearing live music, giving hugs, and even small talk! – feel like Paradise. We have been given the chance to see the world, to see our lives, with new eyes. And the gate may not be made of gold, and things may look just like they did before, but we have been given the gift of appreciating what we had all along, and the knowledge that we cannot take these simple things for granted.

While it will be some time before words like “masks” and “distancing” and “COVID” fall out of our consciousness and our vocabulary, I know that the rest of the staff joins me in true delight as we look ahead to a summer together, with all of you. Let us take each opportunity to be together – for learning, for simchas, for music, for fun – and let us appreciate this moment for what it is: Paradise. Together.

Fondly,

Rabbi Emily E. Segal
During one of our first few conversations, Rabbi Segal referenced a beautiful midrash, a rabbinic legend that seeks to make sense of moments in the Torah that beg for explanation. Immediately after the Israelites crossed the parted sea on dry land, they began to sing: the song that would contain those famous words, “Who is like you, Adonai?” This song is the very first that we encounter in the Jewish literary tradition. The text tells us that Miriam the prophet took a timbrel in her hand, and all the Israelite women joined her in dancing with their timbrels and flutes. The rabbis wondered, why did the women have these instruments in the wilderness? They explain that, in their faith that the Holy One would redeem them from bondage, they prepared instruments in anticipation of their celebration (Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishma’el, 10 II 81).

I remember Rabbi Segal and the members of the search committee turned to this story as a symbol of life at Aspen Jewish Congregation: that this community seeks out every possible chance to celebrate life, even as we comfort one another through our most challenging and painful moments. I knew in that moment that I would like nothing more than to join this community. I had learned that same midrash earlier this year and found in it a deep sense of hope.

I am entering the cantorate out of a love of communal singing, whether in worship services, choir rehearsals, or learning sessions. And yet, in the past year and a half, we have been deprived of chances to sing together freely. Time and again, I have thought of those Israelite women patiently crafting their instruments, knowing that one day, they would play them in joy.

I am eager to get to know each of you. I would love to join you for a meal or a cup of coffee to learn your story, to learn what you love most about this community and what makes Judaism come to life for you. What are the family traditions, stories, and melodies that you cherish most? What are you hoping to learn, whether this summer or in the years to come?

The rabbis teach that, even though the Israelites had their instruments ready to play, they still needed to learn how to sing. For this reason, in describing that very first Israelite song on the shores of the sea, the text reads: “Then sang Moses and the children of Israel” (Exodus 15:1). Moses first had to teach them the words and the melody. The next time the Israelites would sing, the text reads simply, “then sang Israel” (Numbers 21:17). The Israelites had music in their hearts yet needed guidance to find their voice.

As we gather throughout the summer, may we help one another to find our voices together. We all have just as much to teach as we have to learn from one another. Indeed, the great Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Breslov famously taught that each and every one of us has our own unique melody. May we cultivate within ourselves both the openness to learn and the confidence to teach. May we each search within ourselves for those gifts that we alone can offer: our unique perspectives, our empathy and compassion, our particular singing voice.

It is such a thrill and privilege for me to have the opportunity to explore with you and learn from you this summer, and I thank you for welcoming me into this sacred community. I look forward to building relationships and creating meaningful, lasting memories together.
What happens when you break a good habit? We’ve all come across self-help guides that identify points to break bad habits, but have you ever encountered tips on what to do if you break a good habit?

Over the last year and change, many of us have been (essentially) forced to break a good habit or two. The good habit I broke was attending in-person yoga classes. While I tried to keep up my practice at home; it was just not the same. Now, as we resume attending in-person everything I’m finding the current class schedule doesn’t mesh so well with other responsibilities. I’m squeezing in the classes that I can and hoping the schedule eventually gets back to the one I preferred.

As a community, over the past year, a good habit we each needed to go without was in-person services. I’m glad to say that now that we’re back this schedule mirrors the previous version a bit more closely. The only exception being an alternating option of indoor versus outdoor setting. But back to my original question; what happens when you break a good habit?

Making health habitual: the psychology of ‘habit-formation’ and general practice (Gardner, 2012) suggests that it is realistic to encourage those that wish to embrace a healthy habit that it may take up to ten weeks to do so. Now, as we each endeavor to begin returning to our pre-lockdown routines, be it a yoga class or Shabbat services we have a better grasp of how long it may take until it once again becomes second nature.

My challenge to each of you this summer, which is basically 10 weeks long, is to get back to a good habit; be it physical or spiritual in nature. And if it doesn’t come back as easily as you would like, be patient and know that it’s only a matter of time until it’s once again part of your usual routine.

Best wishes,

Jason Schnissel
My husband, Ethan, and I recently spent our evenings re-watching (for him) and watching for the first time (for me) the full library of the Marvel Universe movies. Why? For one, it was his way of sharing a beloved world of interwoven fantastical stories. He was sharing a past love with me, so to speak. It was also a way to introduce me to these characters so that as new stories are added, we can watch them together, now with a shared interest. He was forward planning. And I will admit, I did love watching each movie with him, and simply being present together as we watched. One movie night, that turned into twenty-one movie nights, became moments for us to be together in his past, our present, and our future.

Funny that time-travel is discovered to be the only way to ultimately save this universe (spoiler alert). But more than an enjoyable month of movie watching together, this universe, its characters, and its stories, hold timeless values.

One value that I have been reflecting upon is that of resiliency. This past spring, six of our young adult students celebrated becoming Bnei Mitzvah. Two years ago, no one could have anticipated twelve-year-old students facing the challenges that they did as they prepared for this milestone in their lives. From rescheduled dates, learning sessions outdoors, learning sessions over Zoom, and re-imagined outdoor services with virtual guests, our children have needed to overcome these, and so many other obstacles.

A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to preserve and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles. - Christopher Reeve

This past year, more than any other, my students have become my teachers. When I have felt weighed down by the obstacles and challenges of this strange time that we have been living through, my students have taught me the value of resiliency. I have learned to find opportunity in the pivot, even when initially disappointed. I have learned to focus a little less on how things are supposed to be, and instead appreciate how things are. I have learned to retreat into a fantastical universe at the end of a long day, and then to wake up to recognize the true heroes in my day-to-day life.

And you think life takes more than it gives, but not today. Today it’s giving us something. It is giving us a chance. - Peter Quill, AKA Starlord, Guardians of the Galaxy

Warmly,
Sima Oster

From Our Education & Family Engagement Director
Trail Work Day
July 20 | 3-7pm
With RFOV
Refreshments to follow.

The AJC has sponsored the Tom Blake Trail in Snowmass. Get a little dirty & help maintain one of our favorite trails. Pizza and cold drinks to follow. Contact Jason for more details.

Snowmass Concert
With the AJC
Thursday, August 19
6pm till whenever
Fanny Hill

For more details and to RSVP for any of our programs simply email office@aspenjewish.org or visit aspenjewish.org

Wind down the summer season together...