

Rosh HaShanah Sermon 5778
September 21, 2017
B'nai Israel Congregation
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz

I have a confession to make to all of you: I am a terrible traveler. That's right, Rebecca will be the first tell you that I am not fun to travel with. Well, to be more precise, I'm not fun in the immediate hours *before* traveling. I have no fear of flying—I actually love air travel. I have no fears of being in foreign and unknown places—I trust myself not to do anything foolish or irresponsible. The problem is that in the hours before traveling I am simultaneously wonderfully excited, and terribly anxious. I must arrive at the airport three hours before a flight, at least for international ones. When I pack, I go back to check what I have packed and then I double check. I make copies of my travel documents and put one in each bag, just in case something goes missing. I put money in each one, for the same reason. And I do all of this because I want to be prepared for anything. My dual feelings of elation and anxiety lead me to be prepared for the journey that lays ahead.

I imagine that the same was true for our ancestors as they departed from Egypt thousands of years ago. Our liturgy, the words of the *siddur*, demonstrate that they too felt both anxiety and excitement. During the opening blessings and songs of the morning service, *Pesukei D'zimra*, we read

וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל שַׁפַּת הַיָּם:

Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore.

וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם.

Israel saw the great power that God had displayed against the Egyptians.

וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' . וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בֵּה' וּבְמֹשֶׁה עֶבְדוֹ:

Seeing this, the people feared God, and believed in Him and in His servant, Moses.

In other words, they were terrified and anxious! They just witnessed a cataclysmic event—the destruction of their enslavers and their captors. They should be elated and thrilled! But instead they stand in awe and in fear, with a great deal of anxiety about what is to come, just as I often feel in the moments before a journey.

But later in the morning service, during Shacharit, we read about the Israelites' reaction to being redeemed from Egypt, witnessing the drowning of the Egyptians:

עַל זֹאת שִׁבְחוּ אֱהוּבִים וְרוֹמְמוֹ אֵל.

For this, the beloved ones praised and exalted God.

וַנְתַּנּוּ יְדִידִים זְמִירוֹת שִׁירוֹת וְתִשְׁבָּחוֹת. בְּרִכּוֹת וְהוֹדָאוֹת לְמֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם:

The cherished ones sang psalms, songs, and praises, blessings and thanksgivings to the King, the living and enduring God.

Is this the same people? The Israelites who stood in awe and fear also sang and praised and celebrated? How could this be? How could they really feel both simultaneously? I know it's possible, because it happens to me all of the time, and I imagine it also happens to you. Those feelings of anxiety and excitement often go hand-in-hand. For me, it has to with travel. Maybe for some of you too, or perhaps it is something else. Either way, I would argue that the way to respond and address this reality is to prepare.

The journey of our people began with the exodus, the moment of redemption when God's power was wrought against the Egyptians, forcing Pharaoh to ultimately comply with Moses's

demands, *Let my people go!* And perhaps we should have prepared for the journey, but we did not have the luxury to do so. Rather, we rushed. We hurried. We speedily gathered our belongings and with the few moments we had remaining, perhaps a mere 18 minutes or so, we baked bread. In the frenzied rush to pack up and get out we stopped, however briefly, to prepare for the future. We made bread to sustain our family and our friends as we entered into the wilderness, escaping the bonds of slavery. But that bread needed more time, and what we had instead was *matzah*, a flat, unrisen, unformed cracker of sorts. Hardly a real piece of bread. Just the mere idea of bread. At that time, we were not really a nation, not a unified people. Just the mere idea of a people.

To become a real people, to stand together *agudat echat*, as a whole and unique nation, we would first have to reach Sinai. And thus our journey began in haste and in earnest towards the Mountain of God, Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai. After rushing through the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind us, we began the march towards Sinai, the first major stop on our journey.

Standing at Sinai is a critical moment for all of us. The Talmud teaches us that all who ever were, all who ever would be, together we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the Torah from God through Moses.¹ But that moment of divine revelation requires our preparation. We must be ready and willing to receive the Torah, to engage with the rich tradition that has been passed down through the generations. So I like to think about Judaism as a march towards Sinai, an aspirational journey that marks as its destination a fuller experience of the Divine. Psalm 27, which we read during the High Holiday season at the conclusion of each morning and

¹ Shabbat 146a.

evening service, that psalm is at its core a declaration of one's deep desire to stand at the foot of Sinai and fully experience God. The psalmist declares: One thing I ask of the Lord / only that do I seek / to live in the house of the Lord / all the days of my life / to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord / to frequent His temple.²

Reciting this psalm day and night for a full month before Rosh Hashanah we cultivate within ourselves as individuals and as a community a passionate desire to experience God in ways that go beyond the intellectual, beyond the theoretical. We wish to establish a connection with the Divine that helps us to become the greatest people we can possibly be. And all of this requires preparation. The journey from the Red Sea to Sinai and then to the Land of Israel is long, it is complicated, and daunting. Therefore, I adjure you to prepare for the journey.

Preparation should include two significant actions: mapping out an itinerary of where you would like to go, and choosing a tour guide, or guides, to show you the way. The Israelites had Moses and God as their tour guides, but only they knew the itinerary. Today, you have more control over your Jewish journey. You get to choose the guide. You get to choose the itinerary. This is the incredible gift and opportunity of living as a Jew in the modern world.

So who will be your guide? Will it be a parent or grandparent? Will it be a teacher, a rabbi, a cantor? Will it be a friend, an author, an artist, a musician? Jewish journeys today can take a variety of forms, and it is your great opportunity, and equally significant responsibility, to find the guide that is right for you. As one of your rabbis here at B'nai Israel, I stand here today to declare publicly that I want to be at least one of your guides. I hope that you'll consider this offer seriously. I hope that I, along with the other clergy, can help you map out the itinerary of your Jewish journey. I hope that you consider our counsel and our advice. I hope that you come

² Psalm 27:4.

to adult education classes, that you attend social events and community gatherings, I hope that you take a stand as an activist and as a civically engaged American. I'm not here to tell you where you should go. But I want to get to know you, and I want to learn about where you want to go and why you want to go there. And then I can offer you guidance and assistance. Then I can be one of your tour guides on this journey of Jewish exploration.

The itinerary that you map out will not be identical to anyone else's. It will be singular and unique, shaped by who you are today and who you want to be tomorrow. It will reflect some of your greatest strengths, and hint at your vulnerabilities. And if you map it out carefully, it will take you to places that you have yet to consider, worlds you may not yet know. Your course will change, you will get lost, and you will once again find your way.

But we can learn even more from the narrative of our ancestors and their journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to Sinai to the Land of Israel. First of all, the journey would be anything but easy—a trip that should have taken a mere few weeks instead took forty arduous years. The generation who witnessed the plagues in Egypt did not live to see the fulfillment of the great promise of entering into the Land of Israel. How incredibly frustrating that must have been—to be saved, liberated, given a second chance at life, only to see the dream slip away, an ultimate promise left unfulfilled. Even Moses, our greatest leader and the master teacher of our people, was not afforded this opportunity.

Our people's foundational story can thus be interpreted as being about unfulfilled promises and incomplete narratives. But where is the justice in all of this? Over the course of the past few years, I think that I found the answer. Not really an answer per se, but a solution to this narrative of our Torah, a way to reconsider our history, a way to conceive of our past (and our future) differently.

The narrative of the Jewish people, is not about arriving at a particular destination. After all, if it was, why would the Torah conclude with Deuteronomy?! It should instead include the later biblical books of Joshua, Judges, and Kings, the books that tell about our conquering of the land and establishment of our people. But, alas, the Torah concludes outside of the Land of Israel, not within her borders. For me, the lesson is clear: Judaism is a journey, not a destination.

Now, let me be clear, I am not speaking here at all about how we as Jews in the modern world should conceive of our relationship to the State of Israel. I am a proud Zionist and a supporter of the right of our people to live safely in a sovereign Jewish state. I am not advocating that we shouldn't go to Israel or make *Aliyah*. I am, instead, arguing that the literary structure of the Torah, the foundational text of our people, teaches us about what it means to live life as a Jewish person. It teaches us that the *journey* is what counts, that the journey is what shapes us and makes us who we are, and that the journey is worth it, even if we do not reach the destination. Judaism is a journey, not a destination.

Sinai, the first major stop on the journey, is just one stop. There would be many others. And the story is never really complete. Instead, we are taught as Jews to be aspirational, to strive to follow our planned and prepared itineraries, to trust our guides, and to hope that we will arrive at our destination, knowing all along that we may never actually get there. In the end, you may never reach Sinai, you may not have that powerful moment of divine revelation, and that can be frustrating and disappointing. But it is also liberating. Knowing that Judaism is a journey and not a destination gives you permission to wander, to journey for an entire lifetime, and to relish in the moment, to find joy and inspiration in the achievements along the way, rather than hanging it all on reaching a particular destination.

On Rosh Hashanah we all hang in this liminal moment, not quite ready for 5778 to begin, and still considering our actions and deeds from 5777. For what must we make atonement in the ten days that lay ahead? To whom must we apologize? To whom must we offer forgiveness? These questions force us to consider our past while contemplating the shape of our future. What has brought us to this juncture along our journey, and to where will we set out when it comes time to depart? These questions weigh heavily upon us at this time, and it is incumbent upon us to answer them for ourselves.

Journeys, at least for me, can be both exciting and anxiety producing. This can and should be true of our Jewish journeys as well. But this reality calls out to us and demands that we prepare—that we prepare not necessarily for the destination, but for the journey itself. Judaism is a journey, not a destination. And like all journeys, if we want it to go smoothly, then we must prepare.

I hope that we will take many journeys together: in the traditional sense of traveling the world and learning about Jewish communities in far-off places (and I promise that I'll be a better traveler with you than I am alone with Rebecca!). And I hope that this year you will also prepare for a spiritual journey, one in which you resolve to experience Judaism and the Divine in a new and unexpected ways. Both types of journeys will come with excitement and anxiety, and as I have noted already, we can and should respond to those feelings with preparation: by mapping out our journeys and choosing who will be our guides.

I would like to conclude with a prayer for a safe and successful journey, known in Hebrew as *Tefillat HaDerech*, referred to in English as the Traveler's Prayer.

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם...
...אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם...

May it be Your will, Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors, that You lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace. May You rescue us from the hand of every foe, along the way, and from all manner of dangers that assemble to come upon us.

וְתִשְׁלַח בְּרַכָּה בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ, וְתִתְּנֵנוּ לְחַן וְלִחְסֵד וְלִרְחֻמִּים בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּבְעֵינֵי כָל רוֹאֵינוּ

May You send blessing in our handiwork, and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us.

וְתִשְׁמַע קוֹל תַּחֲנוּנֵינוּ. כִּי אֱ-ל שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה וְתַחֲנוּן אַתָּה: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה

May You hear the sound of our humble request because You are God Who hears prayer requests. Blessed are You, Adonai, the One Who hears prayer.