

Remarks for Volunteer Appreciation Shabbat

March 2, 2024

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Today is Volunteer Shabbat, which is really a wonderful opportunity for the synagogue to celebrate the folks who enable this place to function. Today we have in attendance at least 75 different individuals who are being honored for serving on the board, on a committee, or chairing a program or event. It's too many people to recognize by name ... which feels like a shame. Not everyone can stand on the bima and speak ... which I regret because you all deserve it. And this is still only the tip of the iceberg. I believe our list of invitations numbered a little over 200; not everyone can make it just because we told them to come. And I'm sure we missed people – we looked through our program guide; we asked staff and committee chairs to send us lists of volunteers; we wish we could be at every program and event, that we could personally recognize everyone who has contributed ... we try, and undoubtedly we fail.

We were intentional about designating Volunteer Shabbat on the same weekend when we are having a Scholar in Residence about Jewish Superheroes. Because you are our superheroes. This synagogue hosts hundreds of programs every year, enough that it is more common for someone to complain that our synagogue is overprogrammed than to lament the things we don't do, and far more than our very talented and dedicated staff could manage on their own. And not just programs. This synagogue relies on volunteers to oversee the budget and governance, manage are building, hire and supervise key staff ... really, to do everything to make the synagogue function because the synagogue belongs to its members. In my estimation, more than the other institutions and organizations of the Jewish community, synagogues rely on volunteers not just to be figureheads, not just to donate money, not just to show up – although those things are all important; synagogues rely on members to roll up their sleeves and make synagogue life happen.

There is an interesting detail at the conclusion of today's parasha. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, the Torah says of Moses "*ki karan or panav*, that his face was illumined with rays of light; and the Israelites saw how Moses's face was radiant and were fearful of coming too close." (Parenthetically, the Hebrew for "ray of light," *keren or*, is the same as the word for "horn;" so this verse is the source for Michelangelo's famous depiction of Moses with a horn on his head.)

When Moses saw that the people were afraid, and after he finished speaking to them, the Torah says that he covered his face with *masveh*, with a veil. Rabbi Akiva Eiger, a great rabbi of the 18th and 19th centuries, says that the veil was fitting for Moses because he didn't like the spotlight anyway. The Torah says that Moses was "*anav me'od*, exceedingly humble." We know from the Burning Bush that he didn't want the job of leader; but he took it because God insisted. So Moses was content with veiling his face.

But he couldn't retract completely. The Talmud says: "*melekh shemachal al k'vodo ein k'vodo machul*, even if a leader seeks to undermine his honor, his honor is not undermined. Regardless of how humble he was, in spite of the veil, Moses was still recognized as the leader, a sovereign leader, the greatest of leaders.

And so it is with the people we honor today. Volunteers so often find themselves in the background. Many try to avoid the spotlight. And that's good, sometimes, because even a big stage like this one is not large enough for everyone to stand in front. But my message today to our volunteers is that you can't always hide because we're going to notice ... and we are going to appreciate ... and, hopefully, we are going to say thank you for all those times you peeled away the veil so someone else might be able to pull back a bit.

As a sign of our appreciation, on this Superhero Shabbat, we have a special gift, which Rabbi Berkowitz will explain and present. But before he does that, I want to read the English for a prayer Cantor Josh will chant in your honor in just a moment. (Mi Sheberakh for kahal).