

Mi VaMi Ha-Holkhim, Who Will Join You on the Journey?

Parashat Bo 5781

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I invite you to turn in your *humashim* (if you still have access) to page 375. It appears that the plagues are getting to Pharaoh. Some of his advisors are turning on him. We read in verse 7 that Pharaoh's courtiers asked: "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the Lord their God! Are you not aware that Egypt is lost?" Sounds like a couple recent Senate floor speeches, but I don't really want to go there. Because Pharaoh is ready to negotiate. He calls Moses and Aaron back to the palace and says in verse 8, "Go and worship the Lord your God."

He just has one question: "מי וּמִי הַהוֹלְכִים, Who are the ones to go?" Moses replied, "בְּנֵעֲרֵינוּ בְּלֶךְ וּבְזִקְנֵנוּ בְּלֶךְ, We will all go, our young and our old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds, for we must observe the Lord's festival." But Pharaoh tries to negotiate. He said to them (and I am translating a little differently), "May Adonai be with you when I send you and your children, but see, רָא, there is evil before you (we'll come back to that phrase). No! You menfolk go and worship the Lord, since that is what you want." And he expelled them from Pharaoh's presence.

So first, "the evil before you." Our translation sees those words as a recognition on Pharaoh's part that Moses and Aaron don't just want to go offer sacrifices for a few days. They want to escape, and Pharaoh wants to keep the children back to ensure their return. But there is a different interpretation, brought by the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, in his 19th century commentary HaAmek Davar. He says that Pharaoh was just offering advice, leader to leader. "I'll send you out to the wilderness as you request, but you don't want to bring the children. It won't work. They can't participate in the ritual and they are going to get in the way. Why don't you leave them here and we will watch them until you return?"

That is a philosophy we may understand: Children in the sanctuary are like good decisions; they must be carried out! We need youth services and babysitting because children can be disruptive. I know people agree with that sentiment, but I find it telling that Pharaoh is the one who suggested it. We do need Junior Congregation and Torah Tots and family services, but because of *us*, not *them*. We can't always stimulate kids in here, and so we create opportunities to involve them more proactively. But not because we can't have them here. Children are welcome in the sanctuary; and if they make a little noise, we just have to sing a little louder.

(Public service announcement: Next week is Teen Shabbat, and we will welcome and celebrate the skills and enthusiasm and participation of our more youthful members.)

Rabbi Kushner at the bottom of the page suggests, "no celebration is complete without children." He cites the early 20th century sage Rav Yosef Kahaneman who says, "יֶלֶד יְתוֹם – כִּשְׂאִין לוֹ, an orphaned child is one without parents; but עַם יְתוֹם – כִּשְׂאִין לוֹ בָּנִים, an orphaned people is one without children." An earlier Chasidic master, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum cites the Talmudic suggestion that

Jerusalem was destroyed because schools stopped educating children. Redemption will come on account of our ability and commitment to train children in the mores and rituals and texts of Jewish life. We know how important children are to the Passover *seder*. מי ומי ההולכים, Children are indispensable to our mission.

A Talmudic passage looks at the *mitzvah* called *Hakhel*. Every seven years, the Torah mandates: “הקהל את העם, Gather the people – men, women, children, ואנשים נשים וטף, and the strangers in your communities – that they may hear and so learn to revere God and observe faithfully every word of the Torah.” Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria asks: If the men come to study and the women come to hear (in their world, women did not study Torah as men did), why do the children come? And he answers: כדי ליתן שכר למביאייהם, in order to give reward to those who bring them. Children – even children not old enough or skilled enough to participate – are integral. We earn reward for training them and including them.

And not just so they will be like us. We earn reward through the generational changes that inevitably come. The next generation always adds its voice and brings us along and moves us forward. Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable because we are not ready, but that is our reward for training children in the first place. And Moses understood that, while Pharaoh – maybe not.

For me, the most inspiring part of the inauguration was Amanda Gorman, the 22 year-old dubbed the youngest inaugural poet in US history. Her poem, “The Hill We Climb” described hope as a reminder that America is perpetually unfinished. The Constitution’s call for a “more perfect union” is an aspiration, not a description. Or as Gorman put it:

We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace
And the norms and notions of what “just is” isn’t always “justice.”
And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it.

That’s the promise of the next generation.

It isn’t just children. The story of American Judaism over the past 100 years is one of inclusion and expansion to answer Pharaoh’s question: Whom do we include in our community?

Take women. It is still less than 100 years since Judith Kaplan became the first *bat mitzvah* in 1922. Last week, Peggy Pearlstein celebrated the 65th anniversary of her *bat mitzvah* and I mused about what a *bat mitzvah* even looked like 65 years ago. It was a Friday night; she read a few verses of the Haftarah; not all the girls did it. I’m sure it was very nice, but a far cry from today when every girl celebrates the same way the boys do.

A couple years ago, I had to rethink the Comparative Judaism class I was teaching 7th-graders because when we got to the session on women, and I was explaining positive time bound commandments and the movements’ different approaches to women leading prayer or counting in a minyan, and the kids stopped me and said: “You mean there was a time when women didn’t do those things?!” Okay, they should study more history – there was also a time when women couldn’t vote – but the point is that this next generation takes egalitarianism for granted. Of course they are included.

And not just included. Women are presidents and rabbis and leaders who make decisions that shape our community.

And we didn't stop there. It is almost 15 years since the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards ruled in favor of same-sex marriage. At the time it seemed like a landmark decision – decades too late for some and a big departure from tradition for others – but now? Of course we accept same sex marriage. And we can't stop there because we know there are more affirmative things to do not just to accept or include LGBTQ, but to undo lingering discriminations and prejudices that still make people feel unwelcome. *ומי ההולכים* is not a quick question we answer and move on. It is a mindset that says our community is perpetually expanding.

Next month is Jewish Disabilities Awareness and Inclusion Month, and it's the same thing. Inclusion is not just a building project. Ramps and audio loops are great, but inclusion is a mindset that stops asking what we need to get "those people" to just be happy; because the work is never done.

Or non-Jews. There are things Jews do that individuals who are not Jewish cannot do. Covenant means something; *halakha* means something; and we understand that. But over the past 20 years or more, we have also come to understand that non-Jews are part of our community. They are part of our families. They celebrate with us, join us, and not just passively. They contribute. They are part of the fabric that defines who we are and what our destiny looks like. They have joined us on this journey in ways Moses and his generation did not imagine.

I think the next step will be doing more to welcome and include Jews of Color. We know the percentage of Jews of Color in our area is significantly higher than the percentage of such Jews on our membership rolls. Anecdotal evidence suggests there are too many times when Jews of Color who enter synagogue buildings are made to feel like they don't belong. We know we are a welcoming congregation. We know we are friendly. And we also know we can do more to expand our understanding of who belongs here.

Today is Social Action Shabbat, and we know what that committee does to expand the meaning of community beyond our walls. But it's not just outside and it's not a new question. *ומי ההולכים*, who is to join us in community? We know what Pharaoh thought. We know how Moses answered. And we can be sure that even generations from now, our group will continue to expand. Shabbat shalom.