

The Challenge to be Jewish in America Today

By Rabbi Joel R. Schwartzman

Oh how I envy Moses! Now that we have come to the Book of Deuteronomy, to the portion *D'vareem*, we have the beginnings of Moses' last words to the Israelites. In fact, that is the Hebrew title of not only the portion of this week, but also the Book of Deuteronomy: *D'vareem*---"words."

Moses didn't have the problems that a modern day rabbi or cantor has. When Moses rose to speak his words, he didn't have myriad cell phones going off, although I assume he did have to find a high place from which to speak to be heard over the din of the cattle, sheep and goats. (We are assuming that every Israelite was, of course, heeding the commandment against gossip and was hushed to hear what God's hand-picked spokesperson and leader had to say).

Moses didn't have to worry about the kids being shuttled off to Shabbat morning soccer, complaints about services getting in the way of going shopping. What was there to shop for? He didn't have to compete with mundane, brain dulling television and violent, insidiously, incipiently repetitively mindless movies, and gory, action filled, vapid video games. If he wanted to expose his people to violence, all he needed to do was to wait for God's direction and march his troops

out against one of the hostile, neighboring armies through whose lands the Israelites might be passing.

Also, services in Moses day were better than theater, for they were bloody, laid out in pageantry and infused with inherent excitement and meaningfulness, not to speak of the real life sound effects of bleating and mooing and cooing creatures.

To my mind, given the challenges of our day, Moses had it easy. He had a captive, captured audience, an audience which, for the desert journey, was totally dependent upon God and Moses to provide for their needs.

Today, we have an ever growing number of Jews who have given up the position of Passover's Wise Child. You remember?... the one who infuses and inserts him or herself into the history of the Jewish people; who asks to be exposed to and challenged by Judaism's insights both into life and for living in a vibrant, caring community? Now, many Jews seem to have donned the mantle of the Wicked Son that asks, "What does all of this mean to you?' To Y O U as if they want no stake in present day, Jewish life and refuse to connect with their history or to the fate of the Jewish people.

The statistics which have come forward in the not so distant past tell us that not only Jewish but all religious institutions in America have suffered losses of adherents and members. Fewer people in this country and probably also in Canada are choosing to belong to formal religious institutions. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but let's spend a few moments hypothesizing.

The first factor which probably set off the run to the doors was the economic downturn, although I suspect that this could have been as much an excuse as it was a primary reason. Religion was one of those expendables which people thought they could live without. I contend, however, that while membership in a synagogue or in some Jewish religious institution is far from inexpensive, there were other, more important factors at work which greased the skids, so to speak, and made that lunge to the exits much easier.

There is little doubt that interpersonal relations are far more complicated today in the Western world than they were in Moses' day. Out there in the Wilderness of Zin, you saw your neighbor every day. You *had* to interact with him; for, often, your very existence might have depended upon his help and, to some degree, willingness to share and cooperate. Moses could rally the people around a set of commonly shared entities: the sacrificial cult had no competition

from other religions while the people were in the desert. Of course, once they reached the Promised Land, they needed to deal with idol worship. That's why a goodly part of Moses' Deuteronomic speeches is concerned with inoculating the people against the pagan practices they would soon encounter.

People today wander off into their cell phones so much so that they walk into poles, walls and other people while absorbed in some app. They too often forget to turn them off at night and have their sleep interrupted by pings and bells. They too often put themselves and others at risk when they drive with their cell phones in their hands, paying more attention to the electronic than to the automotive. By the way, I don't know if the new Reform *machzor* has an *al chait* decrying the sin of paying more attention to one's mobile device than to family, but it darn well should.

There are psychologists who have been recommending that we put our cells aside when *and if* we come together for meals. Moses didn't have that to worry about, but we sure do!

On the other side of all this negativity, the folks here at B'nai Chaim have several benefits worth mentioning because you have chosen to be a part of a small congregation. First and foremost, you know each other...and if you don't

know everyone that enters here, it's easy enough to go up and introduce yourself. You have that custom here of being open and not practicing stand-offed-ness and cliquishness that you find in larger synagogues. Second, because you know each other, you participate in each other's lives...well, that is, until it comes to the B'nai Mitzvah of other people's children and your substituting other things for coming here on Saturday morning to observe their *simchas* and your Shabbat morning services. Third, is the special ambience of warmth and caring that the members of B'nai Chaim have woven in to the fabric of this place throughout all the years I've known you.

Still, I envy Moses. It really was easier in his day. Oh, I'm not talking about Israelite creature comforts. I'm talking about being religious. In Moses' day you didn't have to choose among religious ideas and rituals. They were all laid out for you. You didn't have to pay to pray, so to speak, although an occasional sheep, ox or turtle dove was required. Yes, you did have internal squabbles and demagogues, like Korach, to look out for, but they weren't all that prevalent...and you could count on God to open the ground to obliterate them when God was so motivated as God indeed was in Korach's case.

Although the phenomenon of the shrinkage of Jewish participation here in the North America commands far greater study than we can give it here tonight, I would make two closing observations: the first is that whereas people tend to place the blame in part on us rabbis and cantors for this demise, we can equally turn around and ask you, our people, what have you done for Judaism lately? Do you see Religious School parents bringing their kids here on Shabbat evening? (They don't unless their kids are somehow directly involved with the service). They could stand some encouragement. Have you made an effort to understand and interweave prayer and the worship service truths into your lives? Have you come together enough, as B'nai Chaim so often does, to serve the outer community and to do good things to promote this synagogue and its purposes? (As I drove up to the Temple yesterday, I notice that the grounds out there need weeding. Do you *have* to hire some outside person to do this for you? Do you need someone else to organize this or would you be willing to pitch in and do this yourself?)

It all comes down to the joke about mice in the synagogue: do you know the best way to get mice out of the shul? Bar Mitzvah them! Too many North American Jews have behaved like mice.

But if you find the experience compelling and infused with meaning and purpose, synagogue life can be and ought to be the integral, motivational driver that religion was in Moses day, then our words...our *d'vareem*...will have become deeds. These are the deeds that impact everything we do, everything we are and everything we may ever want to be.

Yes, I envy Moses. But I believe that given everyone's energies and commitment, we can turn the numbers around. I think that Judaism has essentials to offer, that it is relevant to our lives no matter what age we might be, and that living in family and in community is probably the most important challenge of our day.