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ASBI Congregation
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Nostalgia

The best peach I ever ate was back in July of 1991. It was an absolutely perfect peach; I never expect to meet its equal. But even though there are exceptional meals, perfectly ripe fruit, exquisite experiences that we cherish forever, we also have a tendency, as human beings, to view the past with rose-colored glasses. And this dynamic has a harmful impact in this morning's Torah portion.

In a moment of complaining, the Israelites recall the diverse cuisine of Egypt:

זָכְרָנוּ אֶת־הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֵנָם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֶבְטַחִים וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת־הַבְּצָלִים וְאֶת־הַשּׁוּמִים:
וְעַתָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבְשֶׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלִתֵי אֶל־הֶמָּן עֵינֵינוּ:

“We remember the fish that we ate for free in Egypt and the cucumbers and the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. And now we are shriveled up with nothing to eat and nothing to look towards other than manna.”

Ibn Ezra notes that the fish was not really given for free. בזול כאילו היא חנם he writes. It was so cheap it seemed as though it were free. This is the biblical equivalent of your grandfather telling you how much a movie cost when he was a child.

Rashi, based on the midrash, understands the “free fish” in an entirely different way.

אשר נאכל במצרים חנם. א"ת שִׁמְצָרִיִּים נוֹתְנִים לָהֶם דְּגִים חֵנָם, וְהִלֵּא כְּכֹר נֹאמֵר 'וְתִכּוֹן לֹא יִנָּתֵן לָכֶם' (שמות ה'), אִם תִּכּוֹן לֹא הָיָה נוֹתְנִין לָהֶם חֵנָם, דְּגִים הָיוּ נוֹתְנִין לָהֶם חֵנָם? וַיִּמְהוּ אוֹמְרֵי חֵנָם, חֵנָם מִן הַמִּצְוֹת (ספרי)

"Could it be," Rashi asks, that the Egyptians gave us fish for free? They didn't even give us the straw we needed to build bricks. "Rather," he explains, "we could eat fish free from mitzvot."

According to Rashi we missed being able to eat and enjoy life before we received the Torah and its heavy responsibilities. Rashi emphasizes wistful nostalgia about childhood innocence. There were no responsibilities. There were none of the stresses of adulthood or adult decisions and responsibilities. Most adults who are blessed with happy childhood memories yearn for the simplicity of childhood when we weren't confronted with impossible decisions about raising children or workplace dilemmas or the dread of household finances that just don't work.. But a life without adult responsibilities is a life without mitzvot. A happy childhood can inspire a creative and joyful adult life, but it is our adult selves who can care for others and shape the world and assume responsibilities.

The 19th century Italian rabbi Shmuel David Luzzato - known as Shadal, validates the Israelites complaint by citing the ancient historian Herodotus and his observations about ancient Egypt:

According to Herodotus' historical writings, carved onto the stone of an Egyptian pyramid was an account of the food that Pharaoh provided to the thousands of enslaved workers who built the monumental structure. Herodotus further claims that Egyptians didn't eat fish and so of course they would make it available for free to their Hebrew slaves.

For Shadal, the Israelite memories of being fed in Egypt are accurate. They are accurate but they are also delusional. The life of free food they left behind in Egypt was a life of slavery. They were fed so that their bodies could be strong to work for Pharaoh.

All of these forms of distorted nostalgia are still with us. We look to the past and remember things as they were not. We imagine that the struggles of today did not exist or we forget that struggle is a necessary component of a dignified existence. And we selectively forget how the elements that seemed good and positive, were not so positive when viewed with a shifted perspective.

As they say, “denial is not just a river in Egypt.”

In conversations about our community I encounter people remembering the past with rose colored glasses: before Covid we had no trouble convening minyanim during the week. We had a robust hospitality system and could find hosts for everyone visiting Lakeview for Shabbat. Chessed requests for meals and assistance were always met with ease.

None of this is true. The reliability of a daily minyan has been precarious for decades and the percentage of the community who avail themselves of the opportunity to pray with the congregation between one Shabbat morning and the next has always been miniscule. It was always a struggle to find hosts for everyone who wanted a Shabbat meal or overnight accommodations in Lakeview. And while people with lots of friends had no problem filling a meal schedule for a shivah or baby, people who had just moved to the community had more difficulty.

Instead of nostalgia fueled by looking backwards with rose-colored lenses, let's look to the future we want to build.

There is a poignant moment, earlier in the parasha, before the complaints that derail the story of the Israelites in the desert, when Moshe turns to his father -in-law and recruits him to come along with the Israelites on what Moshe thinks is a journey of just a few more days until they settle in Eretz Yisrael. **נִסְעִים אֲנִיָּהּ**. Moshe says, “we’re traveling.” I hear such enthusiasm each time this verse is read. **נִסְעִים אֲנִיָּהּ** - we are on our way, please join us, please come with us. **נִסְעִים אֲנִיָּהּ** we have an exciting journey towards a destiny promised by God and you can be part of that.

What future do we want to build for our community? For the first time in years there are large numbers of people reaching out to us who want to learn more about our shul and neighborhood and want to join us for Shabbat. How can we invite them to travel with us? Where are we headed? What values do we want to spread in the world? What lessons do we want ASBI alumni to share with the communities they move to?

Moshe is rebuffed and his father in law returns to his own land and his own people. And Moshe's optimism was soon tested. The journey would not take a few days but would take forty years. But Moshe was right to view the future with excitement and to look forward rather than backward.

This is a **נִסְעִים אֲנִיָּהּ** moment for our community. Indeed, every moment, when properly understood, is a **נִסְעִים אֲנִיָּהּ** moment. We are marching forward, guided by God's vision and the Torah and its mitzvot. We should feel that excitement and we should respond to one another with enthusiasm that, yes, we will join together on that journey.