

Good Beginnings Don't Guarantee Good Journeys

2 Tishri 5776/Tuesday, 15 September 2015

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New Years bring the promise of new starts: that the change of a digit clears the slate and offers the immediate potential for improvement. Much of the liturgy you have heard this morning speaks of such potential: We have been instructed to recall God's charge to make Israel a great nation. With the proper actions and intentions, we will all be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. And if the community as a whole is virtuous "Injustice will have closed its mouth and all evil will have vanished like smoke, the reign of falsehood passing from the earth."

The Torah portion that Bet Mishpachah reads on this day continues with this theme of potential. As with yesterday's reading describing the Ten Commandments, it is from the Book of Exodus, and is taken mainly from the *Va-Yakhel* portion, which is five portions after the one read yesterday. In the intervening portions, Moses announces some additional laws, comes down from Mt. Sinai, and begins issuing instructions on the design and construction of the Tabernacle. In this portion, the tabernacle is constructed. And the construction process becomes a fine community-

building exercise. Community members donate precious metals, yarns and linens. Talented artisans spin thread, cut stones, carve wood, and ultimately construct the Tabernacle. The project is a great success: the community members donate more than enough, and talented artisans execute and coordinate the work. And everyone gets along. Seemingly this portion teaches that with common purpose and dedication, there is the potential for success.

That seems like a wonderful lesson for the New Year. And if this success story were typical of the Torah, the Torah could end with the book of Exodus. It doesn't. And if our New Year's prescription were so simple, this talk would end right now — after about two minutes. It won't.

The portion we've read today tells just one vignette from the Jews' 40 years of wandering through the desert. And during much, if not most, of that sojourn, the story the Torah tells is not the one of teamwork and enthusiasm that we've heard today. It is one of dysfunction, dissension, and dissatisfaction. Far more frequent than the volunteer spirit displayed in *va-Yakhel* are choruses of complaint. Community members frequently voice dissatisfaction at their plight. In one passage in Numbers, members of the community complain bitterly and weep about the lack of variety in

their diet, recalling the plentiful fish available in Egypt. Several chapters later they rail at Moses, exclaiming “Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates?”

At times the dissatisfaction goes well beyond complaining about the local cuisine. During another portion of the book of Numbers, Moses and Aaron face a revolt from 250 chieftains, who tell them that they have gone too far and refuse further to recognize their leadership. And let’s not forget the less-hallowed construction project that occurred in the portion immediately preceding *va-Yakhel*. There the community gets impatient with the amount of time that Moses has been spending on Mount Sinai, comes to the conclusion that he and Adonai have probably abandoned them, and decides to fabricate a golden calf and make sacrifices to it.

Moreover, the community’s less than stalwart dedication to both its secular and divine leadership often provokes similarly dyspeptic responses. Moses occasionally is exasperated with the people he leads. In Numbers he implores God to explain to him “Why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that you have laid the burden of all this people upon me?” And Adonai is particularly unsympathetic to the grumbling. Sometimes the text speaks of

Adonai getting angry. And frequently God simply gets even, as evidenced by these passages from Numbers:

- “the anger of Adonai blazed against the people and Adonai struck the people with a very severe plague,”
- “And a fire went forth from Adonai and consumed the 250 men offering incense [in revolt]”
- “For the wrath has gone forth from Adonai and the plague has begun. . . . Those who died of the plague came to 14,700.”

Adonai even punishes Moses, his two siblings, and some of his nephews for various misdeeds and disobedience.

Yet through all of this bickering, backbiting, and blowback the community has made several significant accomplishments by the time the Torah narrative ends. It has new leadership and a different composition, with people whose key experiences were not as slaves in Egypt. This community is ready to live freely and independently. It has developed elaborate legal and ritual codes. There is also a specialized priesthood to attend to ritual matters, including ritual objects; as a result, the do-it-yourself mentality evidenced in *Va-Yakhel* is no longer essential. And all this required a journey of 40 years.

Bet Mishpachah has also had a journey which is now in its 40th year. The transformation of the community here has hardly been as dramatic as that of the Torah community: we were never slaves, and we are not likely in the foreseeable future to obtain our own building, much less our own land. But there has nonetheless been a transformation: 40 years ago, the people who founded the congregation were outliers, if not outcasts. They were not welcomed warmly most places in the Jewish community, so they formed their own institution. Today, by contrast, we are definitely part of the community: we are members of community councils, frequently interact with other mainstream Jewish organizations, and are the subject of respectful profiles in *Washington Jewish Week*.

We bear some other resemblances to the community in the Torah: we have developed our own ritual practices — such as the *Machzor* used in this service, and we have developed our own internal rules and policies.

Also like the community in *va-Yakhel*, in this congregation's early years, when something needed to be done, the members did it themselves. While we are still lay-led, the do-it-yourself pattern has diminished over the years. We don't have a priestly class, but we have a regular rabbi — and

this year, a second rabbi/chazan to help lead most of the High Holy Day services. We also have part-time paid staff members to perform administrative tasks.

Other resemblances to the Torah community are not so positive. Some of the difficulties that this congregation has experienced are all too similar to those we read about in the Torah portions less upbeat than today's. First, as is the case with the community described in Numbers, our congregation is not always happy or harmonious. Members express displeasure about a perceived lack of vitality, fresh ideas, and new blood. There is often the sense that the congregation had its heyday when it first began holding services in this building 18 years ago and is currently floundering. The lay leadership often expresses displeasure that it is overworked, under appreciated, must satisfy unrealistic expectations, and that its efforts do not always receive sufficient volunteer or financial support from the congregation.

There is also an interesting contrast: unlike the community in the Torah, the past leadership here has not entirely been replaced or supplanted. Several individuals from our early years are still here and most of those who joined the congregation after its inception have been here far

too long to be considered fresh faces. Nearly everyone leading or speaking at our High Holy Days this year is someone who, if you are not new, you have seen and heard several times in past years. Indeed, each of the three people at the *bima* today has been with the congregation for over 25 years. While having a corps of dedicated and capable volunteers is a credit to any organization, people who have been around for decades don't always have the vision, spirit, or energy to transform an organization in changing times.

Notwithstanding its troubles and dissension, the community in the Torah ultimately succeeded in leaving slavery, Egypt, and ultimately the desert behind. Will we succeed similarly? The question posed by the coordinators of this year's High Holy Days services is "Are We Wiser After 40 years (. . . and Where Are We Going Now)" Let me suggest a few ways to consider this question.

Although this is less evident from today's portion than others in Exodus and Numbers, a constant struggle for the children of Israel was how to adapt to being free and autonomous. Many of us who joined the congregation over 20 years ago face an analogous challenge of adapting to changing times. Those of us who are *Gelibte* Jews are no longer perceived

as outcasts by the community at large. We can have our relationships recognized by the federal government and nationwide, and achieve positions of status in community organizations and even of spiritual leadership in large, mainstream congregations. While it is important that Bet Mishpachah continue to be a community of diversity, many of those whom we may seek to attract do not necessarily view themselves as outliers or need a place of refuge. What can we offer them?

Similarly, the community in the Torah had clear objectives — both short-term, such as constructing the tabernacle, and long-term, such as resettling in the Promised Land. What is our current objective? Providing a place for GLBT Jews to pray is no longer unique — just look at the Jewish congregations that have been present at recent Capital Pride Festivals. Should we be reaching out to other underserved communities that may not be those we have traditionally targeted? Should we focus on developing or promoting particular areas of expertise and skill that will attract people of a variety of ages and backgrounds?

Incidentally, the word “skill” occurs repeatedly in *va-Yakhel*. Bezalael, the leader of the Tabernacle-building project, is identified as someone of “divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge of every kind of craft” and also

in giving directions. But In real life, unlike the Torah, skilled individuals do not magically appear. How can we better identify and develop leaders who possess the skills necessary to help this organization adapt to changing times?

While I have spoken about Bet Mishpachah, many of you here today may be more concerned about yourselves than any organization. Indeed, a large number of people of Jewish heritage have no formal affiliation with a religious institution, much less interest in the minutiae of synagogue governance. Some will attend these services — and then none for another year. They may find the liturgy’s prescriptions for them, such as mine for the congregation, to be long on concerns and “hard questions” and short on solutions. Indeed, the liturgy tends to emphasize self-examination rather than keys for success. It tells us that penitence, prayer, and charity will avert a severe decree, but is notably less specific on the ways to achieve a satisfying year.

Some people find this frustrating. They perceive Judaism as a collection of legal rules. Many of the rules are arcane, and some can reasonably be characterized as having questionable, if any, utility to the moral and practical problems contemporary people confront in their lives.

There is an often an understandable desire to turn to ways of thinking or institutions that may seek to offer more positive, simple, and practical guidance.

I would ask such people to recall the analogy of Rosh ha-Shana to a birthday. Most of us are familiar with the recipe for having a happy birthday. It may involve traveling, taking a day off work, or having a party or special dinner with family and friends. To quote a prominent TV chef from the 1970s (not Julia Child): “Very simple, very easy.” But will that recipe work for the next 364 days? Probably not.

One of many teachings from today’s portion is that a good start does not guarantee a good journey. The same is true for the year. A good birthday does not guarantee a satisfying year ahead. For that to happen, people often have to engage in the self-examination that leads to self-improvement. And the period for that self-examination is not one day, not ten, but every day of every year. We hope these High Holy Day services, as well as the services Bet Mishpachah offers throughout the year, can aid you in this quest. *Shana Tova.*