

Guidance through the Wilderness

This is perhaps the strangest time in modern history. Nations around the world are confining citizens to their quarters, ordering common businesses and schools to close and prohibiting even modest sized groups to congregate. Even synagogues will be all but empty this Shabbat, as will the houses of worship for other faiths be closed for their sacred observances. The COVID-19 virus has caused us to alter our lives and we still are not sure when the crisis will be over. The lack of certainty, the lack of a clear direction can make us feel that we are once again wandering in the wilderness, desperately seeking signs and glimmers of hope.

Fortunately, this week's double Torah portion, *Vayakhel-Pekudei* (Exodus 35:1-40:38), reminds us of that which guided our ancestors when they, too, were lost in the wilderness. Indeed, the words that conclude this reading and the Book of Exodus provide us with a timely metaphor:

וַיִּכֶס הָעֲנָן אֶת-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַכָּבֹד יְהוָה מָלֵא אֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן:
וְלֹא-יָכֵל מֹשֶׁה לָּבוֹא אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד כִּי-שָׁכַן עָלָיו הָעֲנָן וַכָּבֹד יְהוָה
מָלֵא אֶת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן: וּבִהַעֲלֹת הָעֲנָן מֵעַל הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּכֹל מַסְעֵיהֶם: וְאִם-לֹא יַעֲלֶה הָעֲנָן וְלֹא יִסְעוּ עַד-יוֹם הָעֲלֹתוֹ: כִּי
עָנָן יְהוָה עַל-הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹמָם וְאֵשׁ תִּהְיֶה לַיְלָה בּוֹ לְעֵינֵי כָל-בֵּית-
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל-מַסְעֵיהֶם:

³⁴ A cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of Adonai filled the Tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses could not enter the

Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of Adonai filled the Tabernacle. ³⁶ When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; ³⁷ but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift.

³⁸ For over the Tabernacle a cloud of Adonai rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. (Exodus 40:34-38)

Our ancestors searched for signs, they searched for guidance...and ultimately their spiritual strength helped them persevere. They taught that there was a cloud that rested by day and a fire that would appear at night as a reminder that they were never truly alone.

It's perhaps a bit much to speak of not being alone when we are forced to stay away from work and school, restaurants and social events, and even handshakes and hugs are shunned. But still we search for ways to overcome the isolation...and we've come up with some wonderful resources: phone calls, emails, Zoom conferencing, LiveStream services, and many other social media platforms are now in full swing to connect us even when we are stuck in our homes. Many of you have already tapped in to Temple Sinai's programmatic, social, and educational offerings via the internet. Our LiveStream services (both Friday evening and Shabbat morning) will allow us to "pray together" in a unique 21st century way. No, it's not the same and it's not as good as physically being together. And yet, the technological forums are helping us bridge the distances between us and are proof that we will not succumb to despair or hysteria (or hoarding). Rather, we are still searching, still seeking ways that will lead us through the wilderness.

In the meantime, we should be extra attentive to the most vulnerable among us in the community: the poor, the hungry and the newly unemployed. I want us to consider, now more than ever, the good work of the local food pantries, including the Jewish Family Service Weinberg Food Pantry.

The Weinberg Food Pantry began providing pre-packed boxes of food to anyone experiencing food insecurity with no documentation or sign up needed. To limit face-to-face interactions and promote social distancing, boxes of food are distributed through a pick-up system directly outside of the pantry. There is also a great need for healthy individuals and groups to volunteer to sort, organize, and box food, and to perform office tasks related to food distribution. If you are interested in volunteering, please contact JFS (jewishfamilyservice.org). To best serve clients in this time of crisis, JFS is asking for financial donations and items that are of greatest need, such as shelf-stable food, toilet paper, diapers, and wipes. Drop off hours are Monday – Thursday from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. at 3201 South Tamarac Drive in Denver. Items can also be purchased from the Jewish Family Service Amazon Wish List.

In the Talmud it was taught: “A person should never stand in a place of danger declaring that he will be protected by a miracle. For perhaps, he will not be protected by a miracle (Tractate Shabbat 32a).

No, we’re not looking for miracles. We are not searching for clouds or pillars of fire. Rather, we are looking for good people who step up to help; good people who continue to teach and nurture and care. We need each other now more than ever. Separation may describe us but we should not allow it to define us.

So, on this Shabbat when we conclude reading from the Book of Exodus, we'll lift up the Torah and proclaim the words that have emboldened and encouraged our people for a hundred generations:

Chazak, chazak v'nitchazeik--- Be strong, be courageous and be resolute!

Shabbat Shalom

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