

## **From Many, One**

Here we were, on our Temple Sinai tour in Israel, slogging through a dark tunnel, cold water waist high splashing against us with only a cheap keychain flashlight to help you see. We had studied about the significance of this place but, at first, it is hard to fully comprehend that this unlikely space played a major role in the survival of Judaism. I'm talking about Hezekiah's Tunnel. As a tourist site it's more than a bit off of the beaten path. Getting wet and banging against stone walls tends to reduce the social media ratings. Indeed, tour guides try to talk groups out of it. And, okay, most of our group chose plan B (Masada and the Dead Sea), but I'm pretty sure that the next group will --- well, maybe not. Still, the story behind this tunnel contains enduring lessons that can guide us through the troubles and divisions that are plaguing our community and our nation.

Unlike many Biblical stories, we have archaeological findings and evidence to confirm the facts of this crucial part of our history. In the British Museum in London one can find impressive archaeological treasures from Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria. Many of the artifacts detail the conquests of Sennacherib, the ruthless despot who was the son of the destroyer of Northern Israel. Sargon II destroyed Israel around the year 720

BCE. Tens of thousands of Israelites were killed, tens of thousands were exiled, and most of the rest fled south to the sole surviving province, Judah. Only Judah survived and it is for that reason that our faith is called Judaism and our people are known as Jews.

After Sennacherib became King of Assyria he aggressively reasserted his empire's dominance. The sadistic brutality of his armies is evidenced from the Nineveh carvings on display in London. He glorified himself by listing city after city that Assyria besieged and then destroyed. Illustrations of torture, humiliation and long parades of slaves are intricately carved, complete with boasts and self-aggrandizing slogans. But of all his battles, there is one city Sennacherib could not destroy: Jerusalem. Oh, he still bragged, for that was his way. On the depiction of Jerusalem besieged it was written:

*And Hezekiah of Judah who had not submitted to my yoke...him I shut up in Jerusalem his royal city like a caged bird. Earthworks I threw up against him, and anyone coming out of his city gate I made pay for his crime. His cities which I had plundered I had cut off from his land.*

How did Hezekiah survive? How did Jerusalem hold out against the conqueror of Babylon and nearly every other city in the Ancient Near East?

Water. We survived because Hezekiah's Tunnel channeled water to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and away from the Assyrian troops. Even before Hezekiah, there was a water channel from the Gihon spring outside the old city walls. The spring was vital for both the local residents and for surrounding agriculture. But with the destruction of Northern Israel and the imminent threats against Judah and Jerusalem, the people had to work fast to ensure that their water supply was secure. The decision to extend the existing tunnels into the city is one thing. However, figuring out how to do it and pulling it off under the most trying of circumstances is a whole different story.

Complicating matters, Jerusalem was then overflowing with refugees from Northern Israel and the surrounding Judean hills. The northerners came with their own traditions, different Biblical stories, and religious practices that were rejected by Judeans. Besides which, the Judeans and the northern Israelite tribes had fought a brutal civil war 200 years earlier. Though we were in theory "kin," descendants of Abraham and Sarah, the Children of Jacob-Israel, there were many who distrusted the northerners, and that's putting it mildly. Of course, it goes without saying that the Israelites also had little love lost for the Judeans. Jealousy and suspicions, combined with concerns about greater competition for the scarce jobs,

dwindling resources and the impending attack by the Assyrians created a volatile mix that could easily have exploded into internecine fighting and the implosion of Jerusalem. Tempers flared, harsh words and accusations added to the strain.

Hezekiah and the leadership had to act quickly and they did. The records do not show if they had a listening campaign first. --- Regardless, the plan was to create two different teams. One was to dig from the Gihon spring. The other was to dig from the Siloam pool (or reservoir). They had to chip and hack through 1770 feet of limestone. Engineers for each team tried their best to guide the diggers, but their tools and instruments were primitive. The workers only had metal axes and chisels. You can imagine what it was like in those dark crevices, trying to swing an axe against stone while standing on wet, slippery rock. Imagine the noise, the constant clanging, the shouting of instructions, and the smoke from the torches filling the air and choking your lungs. The workers cursed their lot, only to be reminded that if this project failed all would be lost. Without water every family would perish. Without this water tunnel, the Assyrians would kill every man and carry off the women and children as slaves or worse. Duly chastised, they swung quickly back to their tasks.

The twists and turns of the tunnel indicate that the engineering was far from perfect. Workers would spend weeks going in one direction only to realize that they were sorely off path. You can still see the failed efforts: rock cut for a dozen feet only to stop. Imagine the frustration after spending all that time, the sweat, the bloodied hands, the stone chips flying and cutting your skin, the dust and grime covering your face, only to learn that all the effort was a mistake. Somebody had messed up and now we have to start over on a different path? But after the brief outbursts venting anger and more than a few choice words, the workers went back to the task at hand. They had no choice; the water had to be secure. Without the water all would be lost. Other crews refortified the city walls. Others built tall and sturdy towers to withstand the impending Assyrian onslaught. But the crews working on the tunnels worked deep beneath the ground, steadily advancing through the solid rock.

Walking in Hezekiah's Tunnel today you can still see the marks made by their axes and chisels. You can run your hand over them and touch evidence of their effort and dedication, their strength and determination. They hammered though their bodies ached with exhaustion. They hammered though their ears stung from the clanging. They hammered though their eyes were swollen from the flying rock. The hammered though

their lungs wheezed from the smoke, the soot and the wet. They hammered and hacked even though they thought constantly about quitting. But they didn't quit. They couldn't. Without them there would be no water. Without them there would be no future.

Water is a traditional symbol for Torah. When the prophet Isaiah taught, "Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water" (Is 55:1), he meant Torah. The Talmud teaches that just as a human cannot go more than three days without water, it is best not to go three days without Torah. Thus the Torah is read on Mondays, Thursdays and Shabbat so we will never go more than three days without (BT, Bava Kama 82a). Akiva taught that just as fish cannot survive outside the water, Jews cannot survive without Torah. Each generation struggles like those tunnel diggers, trying desperately to provide security and nourishment for our people and our faith. The work is exhausting and not always well-appreciated, but those who care don't quit. The motivation to help our people, our faith, and our community propels us forward.

When at last the workers from each side met, they embraced with pure joy. No longer were they from different teams or tribes or provinces.

From the moment the water flowed without interruption from the spring to the reservoir, they realized that what they had in common was far greater than their differences. Together they had helped to save the city.

King Hezekiah then gathered all the people in the square by the city gate and he shared words of Torah, words that Moses had given to the Children of Israel many generations before: “*Chizku v’Imtzu*, Be strong and of good courage; do not be frightened or dismayed by the king of Assyria or by the horde that is with him, for we have more with us than he has with him. With him is but an arm of flesh, but with us is Adonai our God, to help us and to fight our battles" (2Chronicles 32:7-8). The people were encouraged by the speech of King Hezekiah of Judah. They rallied and were able to withstand the taunts and threats of Sennacherib’s seige. His failure is recorded for all to see, both in the Hebrew Bible and on the walls of the British museum.

The tunnel was the means for our survival, but the tunnel required the will and determination of our ancestors. They chose to overcome fear, to overcome political divisions, to overcome cultural and religious differences, to overcome regional suspicions, and to come together for the common good. That sense of unity they created was so profound that 140 years later, when Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, we were already

one people with one unified sense of purpose. Exiled along the river in Babylon, we had both water and Torah, hope, purpose and future.

That lesson of how our people came together to overcome disagreements speaks to us today. Our community has been stressed, our nation is in turmoil, and our world seems to be spinning out of control. Starting closest to home, our Temple Sinai community has gone through quite a trial. I certainly hope that all of us will reflect on how we could have done things differently. Mistakes were made. Hurtful and inflammatory words were spread. Some good friends and staff members have left the community. We are still in the healing process from this bruising experience.

Let us learn from our ancestors. When faced with a tremendous challenge they realized that we could best serve the needs of every family and provide for the common good when we work in cooperation and respect. Only through our collective efforts can we find the resources to teach the children, tend to the pressing needs of the families, engage minds and souls, and create meaningful Jewish experiences for all of our members. From young families to empty-nesters, from those who are celebrating *simchahs* to those struggling to overcome loss, we are of one family, one community, and one congregation. While no congregation can

be all things to all people, we can nevertheless try to respond to each with sensitivity, sincerity, and passion.

As we begin this New Year 5778, now is the time to rally together: *Chizku v'Imtzu*, Be strong and of good courage; do not be frightened or dismayed. There is much work to do. But the effort is worth it. We are preparing and providing life enriching nourishment for each other. Through the generosity of our members, through the tireless work of our staff, through the dedication of volunteers and Board Members, collectively we provide a progressive Jewish home for our families, neighbors and community. That we have had such success for 50-plus years is testimony to the spirit and dedication of Temple Sinai's members. Through the setbacks and challenges and fallen buildings we have always found a common task to rally around. Now is our turn to face the challenges and do what is necessary for the well-being of our members and community.

We pray, too, for the healing of our nation. So divided and hurt we are by political and social divisions. From this chaos racists and fascists and anarchists feast. Those who delight in spreading conflict and prejudice, those who glory in sowing the seeds of suspicions and conspiracies are having a field day at our expense and at the peril of this nation. Virgil wrote: "*E pluribus unum*, Out of many, one!" This motto is printed on our currency,

but its true value is the attitude that what makes an American is not the color of our skin, our religious affiliation, our cultural attitudes or our sexual orientation. Rather, our diversity is our strength. Out of many, one. That oneness does not suggest political unity or shared ideologies. No. The United States of America represents the most vibrant and inclusive democracy of any nation that ever raised its banner. But that oneness seems elusory now that we stand shaken.

There are those who want easy answers and point to the most recent election as the origin of the discord. Well, it is easy to point, but it's wrong. Prejudice, racism, bigotry, and anti-Semitism have plagued this nation from its birth. Good people in every generation faced those demons and so will we. Fortunately, we are not alone. We have each other. And each of us, with determination and grit, can chip away at the obstacles, the enemies who try to lay a bitter siege against our nation and our community. And when our tasks seem insurmountable, we need only to remind ourselves that our goals and purpose are so noble and meaningful that they are worth the effort.

As we begin the New Year 5778, recognize the sacredness of the tasks before each and every one of us. The world needs the strength, the stability, and the values of the United States to withstand the rogue nations

and terrorists that threaten peace. The United States needs each and every one of us to become more tolerant, more engaged, and more willing to compromise for the common good. And each of us needs one another. Let us affirm our bonds of friendship and of covenant. Our people, our family, and our community depend on the cooperative effort of all. Let the cynics mock that our goals and aspirations are too lofty. Let the naysayers doubt us. But let us pull together in unison for common cause. Let us reflect and learn, plan and build, reach out and embrace to create an ever greater community, an ever stronger America and a world in which all may rest secure under their fig trees in celebration of God's blessings.

*Ken yehi ratzon.*