

Kos Shel B'rakhah, The Cup of Blessing  
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5779

In the Talmud, we find the following story: In the days when Jewish merchants and the students of esteemed Rabbis wandered between the land of Israel and Babylonia conveying Jewish learning and juicy gossip, one merchant, a man named Ulla, was a guest at the house of Rav Nachman and his wife Yalta. After enjoying a festive meal, Rav Nachman invited his guest to lead *Birkat HaMazon*, the blessing after the meal. At the time, it was customary to conclude *Birkat HaMazon* by passing around a cup of wine, *kos shel b'rakhah*, from which everyone took a sip. We still observe this custom during the Pesach *seder*, as we drink the 3<sup>rd</sup> cup of wine. After reciting *Birkat HaMazon*, Ulla passed the cup of blessing to his host, Rav Nachman. He took a sip. As Rav Nachman extended his arm to pass the wine to his wife Yalta, Ulla brashly protested, insisting that it was enough for Rav Nachman to drink, that there was no need for Yalta to participate in the ritual of *kos shel b'rakhah*. Respectfully disagreeing, Rav Nachman advised Ulla to reconsider, to offer Yalta the cup of blessing. Ulla adamantly refused, citing a teaching that a husband's blessing trickles down to his wife. Yalta was not amused. She pushed back from the table, stood up, marched down to the wine cellar, and shattered four hundred

barrels of wine. Taken aback by her action, Ulla back pedaled and extended the cup of blessing to Yalta. Yalta snubbed his gesture and retorted: “From itinerant peddlers come idle words, and from old rags come lice.” *Berakhot 51b*

I love the image of Yalta presented in this episode. I love her passion, her fervor, her thirst for fairness and justice and equality. How fortunate we are that the redactors of the Talmud included several anecdotes about this fiery woman, a woman who stood up for herself, who challenged sexism, and who called out chauvinism. Some sages claim that Yalta is mentioned in the Talmud because she was the daughter of Rabah bar Avuha, a prominent lay leader of the Babylonian Jewish community in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Some claim that Yalta is mentioned in the Talmud because she was the wife of the learned Rav Nachman. Some claim that Yalta is mentioned as a “head’s up” to men about the temper and disposition of a free-spirited woman. Other sages, with whom I agree, claim that Yalta is mentioned in the Talmud because she was an exemplary Jewish scholar, who happened to be a female.

The Jewish historical and cultural narrative suggests that Yalta was an exception, that there weren’t many women like her. This simply isn’t true. For six years prior to my joining the clergy team at Temple Sinai,

I taught Jewish women's classes. Each month, I focused on a Jewish woman famous in her generation for her scholarship, for her business acumen, for her indomitable leadership, or for her charisma that made her stand out among others. I'm not talking about Jewish women in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Preparing for those classes would have been a cinch. Instead, I combed the *TaNakh* and the Midrash and the Talmud and ancient folklore in search of more obscure women. And I found them. I found Serach and Tamar and Michal and Sh'lom Tzion HaMalkah and Beruriah and Imma Shalom and Em and so many others: incredible women like Yalta whose courage, insight, leadership and erudition broke precedent and defied established boundaries.

I assume you've heard that this is my final year as part of Temple Sinai's clergy team. It was with great honor that I assumed this role three years ago. I deeply appreciate that you entrusted me with this position. But soon it will be time for me to seek new opportunities and for you to experience different Rabbinic leadership. I'll always be a Rabbi. I'll always be a Jew dedicated to Talmud Torah, to sacred learning and teaching. I'll always be an avid Zionist, passionate in my advocacy for the State of Israel and its people. It goes without saying that I'll continue to be involved here at Temple Sinai and in the Denver Jewish community.

Since so many friends are here tonight to welcome the New Year 5779, I'd like to take a few moments to reflect on how the anecdote about Yalta reflects my experience as a Rabbi. Let's return to the most dramatic part of the story, the barrel smashing. Some of you probably are aghast at the utter waste: 400 barrels of wine down the drain. Don't be. Most numbers in ancient Jewish texts are metaphors; 400 just means a lot. Surprisingly, commentators are quick to defend Yalta's action. They condone her smashing of the barrels. They commend her for passing up the extra sip of wine and for telling off Ulla. They applaud her insistence to be involved. All Yalta wanted by participating in the ritual of *kos shel b'rakhah* was the opportunity to honor God in the same way as her husband and as her guest. Yalta shattered the barrels because she felt slighted. She felt ignored. She felt invisible. Yes, her action was extreme, but it caught Ulla's attention and led him, and us, to think differently about the role of women in Jewish life.

At the turn of the year, as we reflect on the past and renew for the future, it's worthwhile to pause and think about our personal Jewish role models. What aspect of their connection to Judaism inspired you? What values did you learn from them? How did they lead by example? In what ways do you aspire to emulate their devotion to God, or their quest for

Jewish knowledge, or their observance of Jewish rituals and customs, or their commitment to social action or to community involvement?

My Jewish role model was a pioneer. She was less physically demonstrative than Yalta but just as effective in securing her place at the table. I've spoken about her before. Her name is Barbara Ostfeld. Barbara was a student in the cantorial program at HUC-JIR in New York when she began working at my congregation in New Jersey. In the spring of 1975, she was invested as a Cantor, the first female in Jewish history to earn this title. Barbara affected change not through eccentric theatrics like Yalta, but through her pleasant demeanor, through her enthusiasm about her profession, and most especially, through her incredible voice which resonated with her heartfelt passion for Judaism.

As a teen, I wasn't aware of how difficult Barbara's journey was to become a Cantor. She suffered unforgiving pushback by those who protested that "girls can't be Cantors." But she stood fast, she earned the respect she deserved, and she enjoyed a remarkable career. As one of the first 50 women ordained as a Rabbi, I know what it's like to be told: "You can't...." I know what it's like to be called an imposter, to be seen as a charlatan, to be treated as a pseudo-Rabbi. From the days of my first student congregation in 1985 until now, my sincerity has been questioned.

My abilities have been scrutinized. My professionalism has been doubted. It's still hard for some people to accept the legitimacy of women in such a non-traditional leadership role, although it's been 43 years since Barbara was invested as a Cantor and 46 years since Sally Priesand was ordained as a Rabbi, the first female in American history. You would think that the American Jewish community would have been more accustomed to people like me when I was ordained in 1988. No; it still was considered shocking, perhaps as shocking as it is today for women to be combat soldiers or, can you imagine, NBA referees! I think there are a lot of other issues about which to be shocked, like Neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching on Main Street; and mainstream political candidates espousing anti-Semitism; and the resurgence of authoritarianism; and widespread cover ups about sexual assault and harassment; and xenophobic responses to the worldwide immigrant crises. About these we should be shocked. But opposition to individuals in non-traditional gender roles? That's so last century! One would think that by now sexism and bigotry and chauvinism would be anachronisms. One would think that prejudice and stereotypes would be vestiges of long-ago. If only.

We've come a long way since Ulla dined at Yalta and Rav Nachman's table. We still have a long way to go. What I hope you'll remember about

Yalta isn't her outrageous response or the shattered wine barrels. What I hope you'll remember is her passion for Judaism. Throughout history, there were so many eras in which Jewish men and women couldn't engage openly in worship or in Jewish ritual practice. There were so many places where Jews hid underground just to preserve a modicum of their faith. We are so fortunate to live in a more accepting era and in a more welcoming society. I concede that being Jewish in America has its challenges. We have to choose; we have to prioritize. Sometimes we have to fight. I had to fight for a place on the *bimah* and because of that, never have I taken this privilege for granted. Nor should we, as Americans, take for granted the right that we have to practice Judaism without government interference or reprisals. And yet, we're often so cavalier about our Judaism. We pass up opportunities to learn and to pray. We ignore invitations to be involved. We shirk occasions to strengthen and promote liberal expressions of Judaism. As God said to the Israelites when they were encamped on the eastern side of the Jordan River poised to enter the Promised Land, "You have stayed long enough in this place. It's time to go forward." As we cross the threshold into the New Year, resolve to make this year different. Make a promise to yourself to be more diligent about pursuing your Jewish passions. Make a promise to yourself to be more involved in the Jewish

community. Make a promise to yourself to set aside more time for prayer and for study. Make a promise to yourself to be a more positive Jewish role model to your friends and your family, to your children and your grandchildren. Make a promise to yourself to be an active participant in Jewish life.

We're here today because Rosh HaShanah is a holy day. And yet, Jewish tradition teaches us that every day can be a holy day. Every day offers opportunities to celebrate being Jewish. Every day is an occasion to sanctify Jewish time. Every day is reason enough to be like Yalta in our devotion to God, in our passion for Torah, and in our commitment to Israel. Every day we have the right to be enriched by our Jewish heritage. Let no one deny us that right and let no one be denied from sitting at our table and sipping the blessings of Judaism!

My wish for this New Year is that each of us will care more, that each of us will become more involved, that each of us will find within a spark of Yalta's all-consuming fervor for Judaism. In this New Year, make a commitment to yourself to grab the cup of blessing with both hands and drink thirstily. The New Year presents us with this opportunity. Take advantage of it. The clergy, staff, and lay leaders of Temple Sinai are here for you, not just today but every day! There's no need to shatter barrels to



get our attention. Rather, tell us what's on your mind. Tell us what interests you. Tell us how we can reach out to you. Tell us how you want to be involved. I promise we'll respond. It's a New Year, time for a fresh start. We extend to all *kos shel b'rakhah*, the cup of blessing. We invite you to savor it and to share its sweetness! *L'chaim!*