

D'var Torah – Masei 5771 (final d'var Torah as a TBI rabbi)

July 29, 2011

By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Shabbat shalom. This week's Torah portion opens with the words, "These are the journeys of the children of Israel." The name of the parashah is *Masei*, which means journeys, and it opens with a listing out of all the places where the Hebrews stopped during their 40 year-long journey through the wilderness, as they tried to make it to their intended place of refuge, the Promised Land. The Torah portion offers its listeners the opportunity to pause and reflect about what happened at each one of the 42 locations where the Israelites encamped along the way.

The story of their journeys is told from the very first point of their departure from enslavement in Egypt. "And they journeyed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the morrow after the passover the children of Israel went out..." From there they fled to a place called Sukkot, and from Sukkot they went to Eitam.

Reading these words about the beginning of the Israelites' journey, I can't help but reflect back upon the beginning of my journey as one of your rabbis. In fact, as I was packing up my office yesterday, I happened upon a stray piece of stationery tucked into a file folder. It was a note from Rabbi Yitzhak, welcoming me to the staff of TBI, written with warmth and wishes of blessings. I saved it.

"And they journeyed from Penay Hakhirot, and passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness; and they went three days' journey in the wilderness of Eytam, and pitched in Marah. And they journeyed from Marah, and came to Elim; and in Elim there were 12 springs of water, and 70 palm-trees; and they pitched there."

These words cover such an extraordinary part of our ancestors' journey – passing miraculously through the midst of the sea, and then finding nourishment in a desert oasis. As I reflect on my journey here, I think about the many times I was helped and supported to do things I didn't think I had the capacity to do. I think about my first couple years trying to find my footing leading Shabbat services. Rabbi Yitz mentored me and gave me advice, and members of the community were consistently encouraging and supportive, so that, over time, I was able to shed my tentativeness and grow in those skills. I also think about complex pastoral or communal situations that required quick thinking by myself, Rabbi Yitz, Nina, committee or board members, and others, and the many times that, through collaboration and dedication to living out Jewish values, caring people found ways to navigate sensitive and difficult waters together, seeking to bring about healing and care for the needs of the community. I can't say enough about my gratitude for all these occasions.

"And they journeyed from Dophkah, and pitched in Alush. And they journeyed from Alush, and pitched camp in Rephidim, where there wasn't any water for the people to drink. And they journeyed from Rephidim and encamped in the wilderness of Sinai."

Sinai is where the Hebrews received Torah, which the tradition teaches has 70 faces. It's here, at

Temple Beth Israel, that I encountered the faces of all of you. One of the most profound Torahs a person can receive is the Torah of another person's face. Thank you for sharing with me your smiles, your tears, your worried looks, your hopeful expressions, and your eyes of kindness. The depth of the revelation of the stories I've had the privilege to receive from so many people in this community cannot be measured. I am truly in awe.

“And they journeyed from Livnah, and made camp in Rissah. And they journeyed from Rissah, and made camp in K'hay-la-tah. And they journeyed from K'hay-la-tah, and made camp in Har Shafer.”

One of the biggest stations in the journey that my spouse, Melissa, and I have taken together during these last years was when we adopted our two wonderful children, Clarice and Hunter. Parenting is a leap of faith, a stepping forth into the unknown wilderness, and an act of round-the-clock commitment. From the beginning when we shared our intentions with Rabbi Yitz, Shonna, Shirley, Nina, Randy, Jacque, Yedida, the teachers at Talmud Torah, and members of this congregation, we received nothing but support, love, and encouragement. The entire TBI community embraced our kids, helping them to find a sense of place not just within our family, but within the Jewish community. This has been nothing short of miraculous in its impact on them and on us as a family. Our kids have a place where they know they are loved and are safe, and where they can pray in an ancient and beautiful language and in song to a God who loves them. And they've gained access to a tradition whose greatest hero, Moses, was adopted, just like them! Thank you.

“And they journeyed from Tarakh, and pitched their tents in Mitkah. And they journeyed from Mitkah, and encamped in Khash-monah. And they journeyed from Khash-monah, and made camp in Mosayrot.”

One of the things I most love doing is teaching, whether the class is made of kids or adults. This congregation gave me the opportunity to teach 7th grade and – for a few years - 6th grade too. Of course, anyone teaching Middle School deserves to receive combat and hazard pay, and in retrospect I wish I had put in for it. But amidst the raging hormones, relentless flirting, and bouts of sarcasm that characterize early adolescence, I found that lurking within those video-game-and-pop-music-preoccupied minds are incredible insights, honest questions, and fresh understandings of the Torah and our traditions. Getting the chance to connect with about 120 7th graders these last 8 years has been precious to me. I'm so happy that I've had the chance to try to be the kind of rabbi I wanted to have when I was in 7th grade, and I hope that I've made a difference for many of them. They certainly have for me, and I'm grateful.

“And they journeyed from Divon-gad, and pitched tents in Almon Div-lah-tai-mah. And they journeyed from Almon Div-lah-tai-mah, and they encamped in the mountains of Avarim, in front of Nevo.”

Our congregation has also been on its own journey over these past 8 years, and it's been inspiring to me to see it unfold. When I got here, I remember a lot of talk about how frustrating it had been that the capital campaign had failed to result in a new home. Fast forward a few years, and we were breaking ground. I remember when I first began working here, how I would teach my 7th graders in a Jerry-rigged garage that didn't fully keep out the sound from the classrooms next door. The posters on

the walls were for pre-schoolers, because we shared the space with them. I also remember the first time I taught 7th grade in one of the new classrooms upstairs. I could feel the difference in attitude that emerged within the school once we had beautiful and high-functioning facilities.

Throughout my time here, I feel like TBI has been on a journey of growing into its size as a congregation. When a synagogue makes the leap from being small and relying on informal systems to being medium to large in size, it needs to develop more formal systems for doing things in order to function, and in order to include its newer members and provide them with transparent pathways into involvement. When I got here, I encountered a synagogue that had made some of those shifts, but there were many more to be made. I also discovered a board and a staff that were working towards those ends, one area at a time. The challenge for a congregation that's on that path is to come up with good formal systems without losing the intimacy, friendship, spontaneity, and *haimishness* that people loved about the place when it was smaller. I feel grateful and deeply impressed to have participated in this congregation as it has continued to make those shifts successfully and without losing its heart. This is a place with a warm, dear heart, and it shows.

“And they journeyed from the mountains of Avarim, and pitched in the plains of Moab by the Jordan River at Jericho. And they encamped by the Jordan River, from Beit-Hay'sheemot all the way to Avel-Ha-shittim in the plains of Moab.”

And that's where our Torah portion leaves our wandering heroes, their tents pitched in the plains of Moab, the Jordan River and the Promised Land in sight. We know that the Torah ends before they cross that river and finally head into the Promised Land. But we also know that when we complete our annual reading and studying of this great journey, we roll the Torah scroll back to its beginning and start the journey anew. Each time we start over on this Torah journey, in some ways the journey is familiar. We come to know the stories, the recurring stations along the way. But each time we make our way through the Torah we discover new insights, we hear new ideas and interpretations from new people in the community, and we discover yet another one of the 70 faces of Torah. (And of course, in Jewish-speak, 70 is really a symbolic number meaning all-encompassing, even infinite.)

This is the note I'd like to end on. I'm so grateful for all that this congregation has done for me and for my family, and I'm so genuinely excited about the next chapter of TBI's story. And after more than a week of working closely with our new rabbi, Rabbi Boris, I'm so excited about what he brings to this congregation. This is a good time in the life of this congregation. The synagogue has grown in remarkable ways, and we've only scratched the surface of its potential. There's some great fresh talent and some wonderful veteran talent in the rabbinate here, a fantastic staff and Board, and most importantly, a community of people with heart and values of social justice, compassion, and a love of Judaism that give this place the warmth so many visitors comment upon after being here for a service or event. The journey ends, the journey begins; the journeying is linear, the journeying is circular. God bless the journey. Shabbat shalom.