

A NEW HIGHWAY FOR THE NEW YEAR

Rosh ha-Shana II morning 5768 – 14 September 2007

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“Charming” is not a word one typically associates with the High Holy Day liturgy. When the liturgy succeeds, it usually inspires a combination of introspection and awe. It seldom ingratiates.

“Charming” is also not a word one typically associates with the Torah. Certainly the Torah selections traditionally read on the second morning on Rosh ha-Shana are not exactly a feel-good narrative. This traditional reading consists of 24 verses from Genesis and six from Numbers. The part from Genesis describes Abraham’s adherence to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. In the portion, Abraham dutifully ties up his son, sets him upon a stack of wood, and gets ready to prepare him as a burnt offering until God implements Plan B and directs Abraham to sacrifice a ram instead. The six verses from Numbers describe the commemoration of Rosh ha-Shana.

The Torah portion we have just read, however, is as different in tone from the traditional reading as a Hallmark card is from a slasher movie. At Bet Mishpachah, we read from *va-Yakhel*, one of the Torah’s few charming stories. This portion is from Exodus, and occurs several chapters after the portion we read yesterday morning concerning the giving of the Ten Commandments. In *va-Yakhel*, the Tabernacle is constructed. God commands “everyone whose heart so moves him” in the community to contribute

materials and labor for the construction. The community responds generously. It contributes gold, yarn, linens, spices, and oil. The contributions are so generous that Moses must compel them to stop.

The contrasts between *va-Yakhel* and the traditional reading of Abraham and Isaac are dramatic. The traditional reading suggests an obligation to follow all God's commands. In the end, because Abraham had faith in God, everything worked out for him and Isaac. In *va-Yakhel*, by contrast, the children of Israel use God's spirit as an inspiration to take action benefiting their community.

Or do they? Through much of the post-Exodus narrative in the Torah, the Children of Israel don't seem especially inspired. Of course, laws are pronounced, commandments issued, and priestly obligations described in great detail. There is considerable disparity between the behavior prescribed in the laws and commandments, however, and the actions portrayed in the narrative. The people are less often generous, inspired, or even pious than they are complaining or rebellious. The leadership is sometimes visionary, but at others prone to fits of pique. Certainly, through the last half of the Torah, it is much easier to find kvetching than altruism.

Consequently, while the exemplary behavior of the children of Israel may be inspired by faith in God, it is motivated by something else as well. They are about to obtain their first sign of community – their very own tabernacle. The novelty of a tangible symbol all their own inspires everyone to pitch in and help out. You don't need the Torah to tell you

about the attraction of novelty. Look around. Just one day ago, the year 5768 was brand new. The congregation met in a large sanctuary; most people dressed up. Today, on the second day of the year, the space is less grand, the congregation is smaller, the ambience is more informal. In the language of the theatre, everyone is excited on opening night. The production may be a hit! On night 2, even if the production is first-rate, the atmosphere will likely be less electric.

Over time, the production may be a success. The investors may make a profit, the actors may be able to quit their waiting jobs, the director may get a gig at a more prestigious venue. Everyone may be comfortable – and the production may get stale. How can the company regain the spirit of opening night? How can we, as Jews, again achieve the community spirit seen in *va Yakhel*?

Here, you might think, the speaker will reference Jewish scriptures or learning for an answer. Not today. Instead of the wisdom of the rabbis, I will return to the theatre and provide the advice of another type of sage, Aunt Mame. She provided the following advice: “Open a new window/Open a new door/Travel a new highway that’s never been trod before.” The new year is an obvious time to take a fresh approach.

Again looking to the theatre, there are three ways to accomplish this. Each has an analogy in Jewish life. The first: change the setting. For the theatre, this may mean moving the production to a larger venue or a bigger city, or simply shutting it down and proceeding to the next production in the repertory. For Jews, the process is only slightly

different. Is your building no longer conveniently located? Move it! Is the membership or clergy too hidebound, too unwelcoming, too unresponsive to your needs? Start something new! The ability to put your own mark on a new building or new congregation can be a great motivating force. And it's always more exciting – and more prestigious -- to start a brand-new institution than to maintain an existing one.

Around our community, synagogue building is not an infrequent occurrence. Last year the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's journal, *The Record*, contained a photographic essay documenting every synagogue building ever built in the District of Columbia. You can see many of the photographs used in the essay on display in the main D.C. library downtown through the end of the month. In the middle of the 20th century, there were synagogues all over the city: on Capitol Hill, Northeast, Southwest, even east of the Anacostia River. No more. Today, even after a sort of Jewish urban revival, there is no building housing an ongoing congregation located east of where we are sitting right now or south of N Street, NW. The synagogue on N Street, Keshet Israel, uses a building constructed in 1931. The next oldest continuously operated synagogue building in the city was built in 1950.

Much money, much effort, and presumably not a little spirit went into constructing new buildings and forming new congregations in the city and suburbs. Yet one wonders if all these changes of settings really improved the community. What about the buildings, people, and communities left behind? What about the cost in resources? This building was originally constructed 81 years ago. For 53 of those years – including the last 10 – it

has served as a Jewish Community Center. For many of the remaining 28 – and I have lived in the neighborhood for the majority of that interval – it stood derelict, an unsightly hulk benefiting no one.

So let's consider a second method of bringing back the excitement of opening night: changing the cast. This tends to be routine in long-running theatrical productions. New people can bring new energy, a heightened spirit. And it is certainly a technique familiar to students of the Torah. As if to prove the thesis that the community spirit displayed in *va-Yakhel* was an anomaly, God reaches the decision that those leaving Egypt were not capable of functioning as a free, independent people. As a result, God essentially brings in a replacement cast. Instead of layoff notices, God sends down manna and requires 40 years of wandering. At the conclusion of this period, only two people from the original "escape from Egypt" cast – Joshua and Caleb – remain. Every other man and woman has been replaced.

While one can't argue that substantial cast changes violate Jewish principles, they are not always effective. For example, the new and old cast members may not share the same values. Last May the *Los Angeles Times* published an interesting article about the West Village neighborhood in Manhattan. The West Village, of course, was the site of the famous Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, when a police raid of a gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, met fierce resistance. For years afterwards, the neighborhood was a center of Manhattan's gay community. People went there to party. Some with sufficient means decided to live there and are now no longer young. But youth still go to the

neighborhood to party, particularly on the piers overlooking the Hudson River. Not all the current residents are pleased. The noisy, boisterous youth interfere with their desire to get a good night's sleep. The *Times* quoted one 65-year old gay man, who has lived in the neighborhood for 40 years, as saying of the youth, "They're all out with their radios, and they're just hip-hopping all over the street. . . . There's no willingness to interact, or to really treat us with the respect we deserve."

As the West Village situation shows, changing the cast can be a tricky business.

Remember, even though he was judged unworthy of entering Israel, we have never seen another leader like Moses!

But there are other ways we can attempt to retain the excitement of opening night.

Keeping a production fresh does not always require finding a new playhouse or replacing the entire cast. Sometimes relatively minor tweaks to the staging or script can be just as effective. The actors can modify the interpretation of their roles over time.

Change is certainly consistent with the message of Rosh ha-Shana. We are not here merely to celebrate. Instead, our liturgy seeks to have us modify our behavior so we engage more constructively with each other, our community, and God. This doesn't necessarily require that we overhaul our lives. One who attempts to find a new house, start a new job, or obtain a new mate would certainly be likely to experience an exciting year. But most of us, fortunately, do not need to undertake such dramatic change. On the other hand, there is the advice I received from a fortune cookie I had in a Chinese

restaurant a couple of months ago. This said, “You’ll do fine as long as you don’t sign up for anything new.”

This is not such good advice. It is true that much of the High Holy Day liturgy focuses on things we are not supposed to do. Refraining from dishonesty, gossip, and uncivil conduct are virtuous. But we are unlikely to have a satisfying year if we merely resist sin.

Instead, if we can find that new highway referenced in *Mame* to travel, we can proceed through the new year with a sense of spirit. *Mame* has its limits as a guide to life; I will not endorse its sentiment that “We Need a Little Christmas.” Nevertheless, there are many ways consistent with the spirit of Judaism that one can help the community and attain a sense of satisfaction.

The community in *va-Yakhel* didn’t sit on the sidelines waiting for the more talented or more experienced members to come forward. They didn’t wait for personal solicitations. They did not limit their participation to offering helpful suggestions or constructive criticism on how others should act. Instead, they took the initiative and acted themselves. Don’t let your travels this year be vicarious. Join a new organization. Play a new, larger, or different role in a group in which you are currently involved. This synagogue is certainly a group that would benefit – and which actively seeks – additional players to augment a sometimes tired and overextended cast.

Any new role that we play is unlikely to yield a result as glorious as the Tabernacle described in *va-Yakhel*. But it will be far better next August to look at 5768 with a sense of accomplishment than a feeling of ennui. *L'shana tova tikateivu*. May all of us have a happy and healthy new year.