

The Last Sermon
Rabbi Dan Danson
June 17, 2022

I gave my installation talk when we were reading from Bereshit, from Genesis, and finished by saying, “Tonight, we are Jacob, beginning a new chapter on this journey, tied to the holy by dreams both ancient and new.” If you will allow me, journeys are akin to adventures. Some 5 or 6 years ago I took a kayaking trip with some colleagues, down the John Day River in northcentral Oregon. It was late April, and the river was filled with spring melt water and when the sun was out it was comfortable but when it went behind the clouds it was, well, early spring on a very cold river. It was supposed to be an easy paddle, but in the afternoon the wind was in our face, blowing at 15 or 20 mph, and our wet suits just didn’t do the trick. I remember thinking, “the thing about an adventure is it’s really an adventure” and most days had highs and lows. Friends, we have been on a crazy adventure together. The night I was installed as TBI’s rabbi was in November 2019, just 4 months away from the pandemic. Since March 2020 we have all been on an adventure, with many lows but as with all adventures, we’ve also experienced growth, discovery, and accomplishment.

It has been 2 years and 3 months since we locked down and it has been a searing experience. I have seen lots of big historical events during my rabbinate: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, The First Gulf War in 1991, with scuds reigning down on Tel Aviv, 9/11 and the Second Gulf War, and the Great Recession. But none of them reached into every life the way the pandemic has, and because of this the synagogue has played a more central role in people’s lives than perhaps at any other time. We were a window to the world, a place to be in touch, and a place of solace and inspiration.

I began talking with Ira about COVID precautions in early March of 2020. We had concerns about Purim, but we stayed the course, with a lovely dinner and megillah reading. Then as the Shabbat of March 20th approached, I talked to Ira about what was happening on Long Island where Julie and I live. We were at ground zero; her hospital had been turned into a

COVID facility, save for the maternity wing. The hospital was running 20% over capacity and it’s morgue was full. Ira listened, paused, and blurted out, “don’t come.” By that Friday almost every synagogue service in America had gone virtual. It’s easy to forget how intense those early days were and how terrifying. Until things warmed up, we had a Shabbat event every week where there would be 30 or 35 screens logged on. Adult ed often had 25 screens. We learned how to navigate the cacophony of a virtual schmooze. We learned the value of a virtual schmooze.

Soon, Stu Needleman was working with Dr. Alan Kaplan of TAY in Manchester on what equipment to get for streaming services from the sanctuary and by the High Holidays we were up and running. We had online services, online education, and streaming from the sanctuary. Come December, the schmooze was all about securing an appointment for a vaccine and it was clear we were going to be as inoculated a community as there was in America. We had a sense of hope and promise.

There were lots more successes: We figured how to get religious school on Zoom, and I tortured poor Naomi Goldman by making her produce an online Purim Spiel and then the next year upped the ante by making it a musical and she found her inner Hal Prince. Amazing. We did a wide range of adult education online: looking at the Jewish role in the great American songbook, figuring out how everyone could access a movie online, and having guest speakers, including our shleichen, and one from the National Yiddish Book Center. We did two well attended congregational seders on Zoom. There were many adventures

I don’t want to look back on these past 27 months with rose colored glasses. It’s been hard, really hard, with lots of losses. The isolation of the frail elderly has been heart breaking. So was everything around dying and funerals, especially in those early days – hands un-held and the electronic funerals and shivas. Touch is how we love through death and too often there was

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no touch. There was the madness of life in young families, with school, work, and playground all shmushed together. Teens were unable to socialize, college kids took classes in their bedrooms, and two cohorts graduated by Zoom. So many loses.

The Torah is a story of how a nation, the Israelites, move into a new world after a searing experience by way of their journey, qua adventure. Their time in the wilderness is a mess, with rebellions, ingratitude, and the flubbing of the guaranteed conquest of Canaan. It is also a time that sees the birth of moral imagination, spiritual excellence, and a civil culture that has democratic and egalitarian elements. Our time is a mess and is creative in the extreme. One might say of our COVID experience, welcome Israelites to our new world.

Certainly, we face lots of chaos. It feels like a time of unraveling, with shortages, inflation, and a baffling loss of everyday services (try getting a plumber.) Psychologists' offices are jammed. Everyone seems angry – everyone is angry. As for the news, it can best be summed up as, “can't we just go back to bed.”

But it is also a time of discovery. We have met many new things that work well; how video can tie us to work and help us celebrate across distance. There are less of us in the sanctuary but more of us at services. Meetings are much more to the point and take a third the time. Regional work and collaborating is a new wonder.

At TBI we have continued to have success at what you do so well, working together, partnering with rabbis, and, remarkably, welcoming new people into the Temple. We have set up new systems like our video setup, and reinvented old ones, like the food festival. We live in a liminal time, a time between worlds, both transformative and worrisome.

So what parting words do I have?

The book of B'midbar ends with the Israelites about to successfully enter Eretz Yisrael. But there is one more task ahead, a new telling of what they've been through and where they are headed, the book of

D'varim, of Deuteronomy. D'varim is not an easy book. It celebrates the journey the Israelites have taken with God and takes them to task. It is a book of communal strokes and more than a few rebukes and challenges. It raises the bar on what it is to be in a covenantal relationship with God. It is a text of positive strokes and throwing down the gauntlet.

So, what strokes should we give ourselves, what about the best of ourselves at TBI has turned out to be real? Well, there have been the many mitzvahs done, the quiet kindnesses between members. There have been some powerful moments of online community when we needed them most, filled with patience, generosity, and seeing the glass as half full. There has been the continued warmth of welcome one sees at TBI. This is not a place you're going to walk into without being greeted, without someone, many someones, asking after your story.

And the challenges? Most are the classic synagogue ones, hardly TBI's alone. Congregations, and here I'm very deliberately speaking beyond just synagogues and including churches, fellowships, and mosques – congregations broadcast success. There are couples everywhere, beautiful children, and nice cars outside. For so many of us in America these are things are beyond reach. Many Jews quietly think, I have so little of this, how can I ever belong? To really be a kehilat kadosh, a holy community, we always need to be working to broaden our welcome.

I would also suggest that we need to work at valuing the members who don't come much. We should ask less, “how can we get them more involved,” and more, “how are you doing?” Remember, most American Jews choose not to join synagogues. Our members whom we don't see so often have made the choice to support a Jewish presence in the Lakes Region. That's a big deal.

Lastly, think Caleb and Joshua, not the other 10 spies in Numbers. To remind us, early in Numbers, Moses sends 12 spies into Canaan to check things out before the invasion. 10 of them are overwhelmed and convinced the invasion is doomed. Only Caleb and

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Joshua hold out hope. Keep in mind the person you cannot see who is about to walk through the synagogue door. Look to the future. While we don't want the pain of global warming with the Colorado River drying up and or Florida being underwater, I suspect the Lakes Region will have its day again.

My two final goals as your rabbi have been to do a few hybrid adult ed sessions and to see the return of an Oneg on Friday nights. Both are checked off. At our first Oneg since March 2022 I had 3 or 4 very wonderful, important conversations. I wasn't the only one, they were happening all over the social hall. Our hybrid capacity has opened up new possibilities and access, but I worry that doing too much online is akin to eating our seed corn. There are still things that only happen when we're together in person. Be a shomer, guard this well.

Lastly, a few thank yous. Thank you for the privilege of being your rabbi these past three years, for our worship and study together. For the privilege of teaching our very wonderful and charming children and a thank you to our members who taught them. Thank you TBI-niks for focusing on the possible rather than our difficulties and thank you for your partnership. As you know, Rabbi Boaz Heilman was endlessly delighted by TBI. I am gob smacked by how skillfully you navigated these past three years. I know Rabbi Jan Katz is so very excited to be your rabbi. You are a congregation that supports and encourages its rabbis and we rabbis are very grateful for this.

There are a thousand people here I could thank, so I'm going to keep it pretty general, so I don't leave anyone out. Thanks to Ira Keltz and the board for so many things. We are so lucky to have such generous and skilled leadership. Thanks to Melody and Joel, my bima partners. Rabbis and cantorial soloists have a unique tie, and it has been a delight to share in the treasure that is our Melody. Thanks to my home hosts and, especially, to the many dogs and cats I have gotten to know. TBI loves its pets. Thank you to Paula and Alan Halprin for the use of their condo and their graciousness. And thanks to Julie and my family for

their support. My adult kids kinda have a TBI fan club going but I will take the names of their favorites to my grave.

Last week's portion was Naso, where we find the y'verechecha, these words that we love so much.
[please stand]

Y'avarech'cha Adonai v'yishm'recha.

Ya-eir Adonai panav eilecha v'chuneka

Y'sah Adonai panav elecha v'yasem lecha shalom.

May God always see your gifts and needs and self. May our nation and our world take peace to heart and may our sense of wholeness be restored.

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