

Hazzan Larry Goller
Hazzan Putterman Cantorial Leadership
Award Dinner – Jewish Theological Seminary
Thursday, June 18, 2009

In this week's portion of *Sh'lach L'cha*, we read how Moshe sends 12 people, one from each tribe, to scout out the Land of Canaan that the Children of Israel are looking to capture and occupy. Two of the scouts, Yehoshua bin Nun and Calev ben Yefuneh, bring back a positive report of an "exceedingly good land." But the other 10 scouts gave a more dismal account of the land as one that "devoured its inhabitants." As a result, God decrees that the current generation, save Yehoshua and Calev, will die before reaching the Promised Land.

Chazal, our sages, understood that the Children of Israel were not to blame. The generation that left Egypt, having been raised in that oppressive milieu, did not possess the psychological wherewithal to appreciate the freedoms awaiting them in the new land.

Exactly 10 days from this moment, I will be boarding a plane and joining with my colleagues present tonight, Hazzan Abe Mizrahi and Cantor Steve Stoehr, and over 75 other cantors, as well as many lay people, on a Cantors Assembly Mission to Poland and Israel. This trip has special significance for me, as Poland was the birthplace of my father, as well as my mother's parents.

Some of you know this is a second career for me. I am a graduate of the undergraduate Wharton School of Business and in a former life, worked in the consulting division of the then big 8 accounting firm of Arthur Anderson. [No, I did not work on the Enron account!] Later, I worked as assistant vice president for a brokerage firm on Wall Street.

When I told my father of my plan to leave what he saw as a prestigious career in order to study to become a Hazzan, he gave me that look that basically said, “*Du bist a bis’l meshuggeh?*” I graduated from the JTS in 1995 and went on to serve in my first pulpit in New Jersey. My parents came and spent a Shabbat with me that October and my father had the opportunity to see me established in my new career, in a respected position, living as part of a caring community.

Unfortunately, my parents, who were older and not in the best of health, would both pass away within the next few months. But I was able to take heart in the fact that they had a chance to see that I had made the successful transition to a new and fulfilling career – and life.

My father didn’t understand that a Hazzan could be a respected professional. Having been raised in a region and time in Jewish history where a cantor was for the most part not a way to make a living, let alone a respected profession, he could not appreciate the career I was to undertake. Like that generation that grew up in Egypt, he was not able to make the psychological leap to understand the decision I was making, leaving one life and taking on another.

I was fortunate to be living in a time and place, as Chancellor Eisen said earlier, the single most blessed Diaspora in the history of the Jewish people, where I could choose to become a cantor and train to be a Hazzan, an important leader in the Jewish community. But it was the existence of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York that made that decision possible. It was the presence of the Seminary, the availability of professors and instructors who were leaders in their field of study, the attraction of a broad and comprehensive program of not just technical training, but *Limmud*, Jewish learning, that drew me into course of study that would prepare me for this most fulfilling career and life as *k’li kodesh*.

The four years I spent at the Seminary were the seven most difficult years of my life – or so it seemed at the time. But they were also the most rewarding, and ultimately served as excellent preparation for assuming my subsequent role.

I am grateful to the Seminary for that education and training, to my congregation North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, and to all of you for your support of that indispensable institution of Jewish learning. I thank the Seminary for bestowing this award on me tonight, though it goes without saying, the joy of serving my congregation, my community, and my God are reward enough for a lifetime. Thank you.