

Shabbat Shuvah
Vayeilekh 5783

שבת שובה
וילך תשפ"ג

The Courage to Hope

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Head of the Year:

It is not too late. It is early
and about to grow. Now
is the time to do what you
know you must and have feared
to begin.

—Marge Piercy

Shabbat Shuvah represents the place between hope and fear; between transformation and unrealized aspirations. We may have made big promises on Rosh Hashanah, resolving to make significant changes in our lives, entering the year with a sense of excitement and optimism. But as Yom Kippur draws closer, we become more attuned to our own shortcomings. So much is beyond our control. Changing old patterns is arduous, the path uncertain. Confronting our own limitations, we can feel afraid and alone. The spiritual work of this moment lies in discerning the difference between acknowledging our limitations and succumbing to fear.

In Parashat Vayeilekh, the Israelites stand on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. Like us, they are full of possibility and trepidation. Moses is running out of time. Without him, the Israelites will have to confront the challenges ahead without their constant guide and intermediary to God. We might imagine them, along with Joshua, who is poised to become their leader, feeling untethered and afraid. Moses offers them comfort and reassurance: they are not alone. Joshua and the Israelites are entering a changed world but, Moses assures them,

ה' אֶל־לִפְנֵיהֶם יֵצֵא עִבְרָ לְפָנֶיךָ

God will cross over before you. (Deut. 31:3)

Ha'amek Davar, the 19th-century commentary of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv), points out the difference between the phrasing of this verse and a similar verse as the Israelites first left Egypt (Exod. 13:21):

וְהָיָה הַלֵּךְ לְפָנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן לְנַחֲתָם הַדֶּרֶךְ

And God went *lifneihem* (ahead of them) by day in a pillar of cloud to guide them along the way.

The language in Exodus, according to the Netziv, communicates that the Israelites followed behind passively as God split the Red Sea, whereas “God will cross over before you” means that God’s action is entwined with the Israelites’ action. Once they cross into the Promised Land, the Israelites will actively determine their own destiny, as partners with the Divine.

If we are to create real change in our lives, we cannot wait passively for the change to happen to us. Despite loss and disappointment, we must move forward, repairing what is broken in our relationships and our world. In their first steps out of enslavement, the Israelites followed behind an enormous pillar of cloud. Now, as we begin this new year, we must chart our own journey—just as the Israelites did when they prepared to enter the land. We must seek the Divine inside ourselves.

Like the Israelites, as we navigate the challenges of an uncertain future, entering the New Year in yet a new stage of the pandemic, a time of geopolitical and planetary turmoil, an era of significant change for the Jewish people as a whole and, closer to home, for JTS as an institution, we don’t always feel the presence of God. The consciousness of our own limitations and of the very real obstacles in our way can undermine our confidence that we can transform,

that we can enter the Land. Fear and self-doubt encroach, making it difficult to remember that we are not alone. Like the Israelites, who when overwhelmed by doubt and fear wished for a moment that they could return to Egypt, there are always those who will wring their hands, saying that our best days are behind us, that we cannot repair what we have broken and move forward.

Moses seems to have understood this. Facing his own death, and the awareness that he would not reach the land himself, he summons his most powerful rhetoric, leaving Joshua and the Israelites—and us—with a message that continues to accompany us and guide us. He reassures and exhorts:

חֲזַקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוּ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי אִי ה' אֶל־לְקִיךָ הוּא
הַהֲלֵךְ עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ:

Be strong and courageous, do not fear or dread them; for it is indeed your God who marches with you: [God] will not fail you or forsake you. (Deut. 31:6)

Strength and courage take many forms. According to the 12th-century Midrash *Lekah Tov*, *ואמצו* refers to being strong in Torah and mitzvot, and taking courage in *ma'asim tovim* (responsible and ethical deeds) and *derekh eretz* (treating others with dignity and respect).

Moses emphatically repeats these key words to Joshua in the next verse, reassuring him and the Israelites.

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לַיהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינֵי כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזַק וְאַמְץ

Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: “Be strong and courageous” (Deut. 31:7)

We repeat these words, in Psalm 27, throughout the Days of Awe, a kind of mantra that can steel us and comfort us as we encounter the unavoidable fears and doubts that accompany all new beginnings.

קוּזֵה אֱלֹהֵי ה' חֲזַק וְאַמְץ לַבָּרִךְ קוּזֵה אֱלֹהֵי ה':

Turn to God; be strong and take courage, and turn to God.

The repetition of “turn to God,” which bookends this verse, draws the attention of the commentaries and the midrash. They admit that we repeat these words at the beginning and end of this verse because sometimes we pray and our prayers are unanswered. The experience of fearing our prayers are unheard, that our path to change and renewal is blocked, is clearly familiar to both classical and contemporary commentators. They tell us to try again. To look deeper. Not to give up hope.

As we stand in this liminal moment, in these in-between days that are filled with awe, in its dual meaning of fear and wonder, each of us can consider the ways in which we can fortify ourselves with hope as we move toward our promised lands.

The lesson of Shabbat Shuvah is to have the courage to keep returning. This season calls us to search for God, not ahead of us, like a pillar of cloud providing obvious and easy markers on our path, but inside of us. We search for all that is entwined within us: for God, for the strength we can draw from our ancestors, and for the courage to change. Only then can we move forward, knowing that change is possible and that we are not alone.