

Nitzavim/Vayeilekh Sermon 5777

I once heard the comedian Mort Sahl relate an encounter he had with Alexander Haig. Haig, who served at the highest levels of the American military and government, including a stint as Secretary of State, was smoking a cigar. He offered one to Sahl, noting that it was of the highest quality, a Cuban cigar in fact. Sahl noted that importing Cuban goods to the U.S. was banned in order to avoid supporting the Castro regime, a fact that Haig was well aware of. Haig replied “I prefer to think of it as burning his crops to the ground.” It’s all in how we choose to see things.

As Moses nears the end of his life - and he knows it is coming - he summons his aide Joshua. God has already told Moses that Joshua will be the one to lead the people into Canaan, to wage the battles that will make real the divine promise of a homeland. Now the time for the transition has come. Taking Joshua before the entire people, he tells him “*Hazak v’ematz*,” “Be strong and courageous, for you will come with this people to the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you will cause them to inherit it. The Lord, it is He who goes before you; He will be with you; He will not release you nor will He forsake you; do not be afraid and do not be dismayed.”

It’s quite a scene, because of all that we know that has brought the two of them, as well as the people as a whole, to this point. And it is notable for how differently it plays out from the similar transition that took place before the death of Moses’ brother Aaron. Aaron served as the first Kohein Gadol/High Priest, and as he reached the end of his life his vestments were taken off of him and placed onto his son, who then began to serve as the next hereditary Kohein Gadol. I have always felt badly for Aaron; rather than wait for his death to naturally pass his duties onto

his son, the transition takes place in a way that seems to degrade Aaron in the people's eyes, and in his own, not because it wasn't time for it to take place, but because he seems less in control over events. It is the equivalent to a child taking over a family business, or taking away an aging parent's car keys: We can all see that it is time, but the parent may still feel hurt, supplanted by the children they have raised, and robbed of the dignity that their former status afforded them.

Moses seems to have taken that experience to heart when it is his turn to install his successor. He gives a gracious and inspiring speech, downplaying his own leadership role and emphasizing God's providence and support. The same transition is taking place; the older man is yielding to the younger. The next thing that happens will be the same: The leader will die. But Moses makes something out of this moment that Aaron was unable to. Just as Aaron passively allowed the people to create a golden calf, whereas Moses smashed the tablets, burned the calf down and made the people drink its ashes, here too we see the difference between watching something happen and making something happen. Even when the facts will not differ, how we experience them certainly will.

There are many times in life when things don't go as we may have hoped, or when we have to do something we would rather not, or even when tragedy strikes and we feel that life has spun out of our control. Those are the times when we have a choice to make: Do we follow the example of Aaron, quietly accepting our lot and letting events play out? Or do we adapt the Moses approach, taking the situation in which we find ourselves and actively crafting it in a way that maximizes our own dignity and that of others? Use any cliché you like: Turning lemons into lemonade, finding the silver lining, looking on the bright side of life. These are not just slogans that make us feel better; they reflect the wisdom that how we respond to challenges is the true

measure of our character. It is easy to be courageous when we are mentally, physically and emotionally at our peak; it is another thing entirely to do so when when we are not. To the degree that we can continue to serve as inspiration despite our own frailties or fears, we show ourselves to be capable of more than perhaps even we know. It all depends on how we see things, and on how we wish to be seen.

Shabbat shalom.