

## Shelakh Lekha Sermon

There are times when the closer we get to a goal, the harder it becomes to take the last steps necessary to achieve it, when even minor setbacks provide excuses for not fulfilling our destiny. A familiar trope in movies is the bride or groom who get “cold feet,” who suddenly change their minds about the whole thing just as the wedding is about to happen. When a first child is born, many of us suddenly realize the magnitude of the change in our lives, and realize “I’m not ready for this.” When our daughter Celia was born I took a few days off from class to help Lisa through the birth and recovery. But then I had to get back to my studies. When I started to get ready to go to class, Lisa cried out “You’re not going to leave me alone with the baby?!” And this Shabbat, we read this week about what should have been a moment of grand achievement, of divinely promised redemption, the Israelites suffer what one commentator has called “a massive failure of nerve.”

The people stand ready to inherit Canaan, to conquer it as God has predicted and promised. This is the same God that brought them out of Mitzrayim with signs and wonders, whose plagues in Egypt gave the lie to Pharaoh’s own claim to divinity, who drowned Pharaoh’s chariots in the Sea of Reeds, who provided the Israelites with food and water in the wilderness, and, finally, gave them a code of law for living righteously in the land they were promised. But at the moment when God and Moses lead the people to the very edge of Canaan, face to face with their future, they hesitate; hearing of challenges to the conquest, they vacillate; with the land directly in front of them they equivocate, dither, hedge, and waffle. They suggest, of all things, going back to Mitzrayim, where things were so wonderful!

The story is a cautionary tale about the dangers of missed opportunities. What more powerful proof of success do the people need than God's promise? Yet anxiety about change is deeply human. The fear of the new, of change, is universal. The known feels safe, even when it is obviously no longer right (let's go back to Mitzrayim), and therefore preferable to the unknown. How often do we miss out on something because we just can't bring ourselves to go that final, step over the threshold of our doubts?

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that instead of a leap of faith, Jews take a leap of action. Grounded in our values, and the promises made to us ages ago to survive and to thrive, we have found ways, again and again, to outrun, outsmart, and outlast the people and events who have threatened us. And not only outlast, but to thrive. Wherever Jews have gone, they have found ways to rise in society, to become leaders in every field opened to them. Timidity is not a marker of Jewish history.

Unlike the Israelites in this week's parshah, we have usually lacked God's direct and firm promise of success. And if they had crippling doubts with that promise, how much more do we doubt ourselves when faced with important decisions? In the centuries since, we have had to find within ourselves the courage to move: from place to place, from outside society to within it, from tradition to change. How do we know that a new thing will be the right thing? We don't. In our Wednesday lunch and learn class we are reading Dr. Jonathan Sarna's book [American Judaism](#). What we are learning is that for every immigrant's tale of success in the new world, there is another of grief, that the communal threats of congregational splits, of high rates of intermarriage and non-observance of Judaism are not specific to the 20th century; they go back to pre-colonial times.

So with all of the proposed changes for the fall - maintaining Traditional services while elevating egalitarian services, switching to a newer mahzor, rotating services between two rooms, redesigning the beit midrash and Kroll Ballroom, just to name the most high profile issues - we begin to doubt. That is not only expected; I would be shocked if we didn't feel it.

If we cannot expect a revelation from God, and we know full well the prospect of failure could be equal to the possibility of success, how do we surmount our doubts? New eyes can help. Coming here without the emotional history of the past ten years at EBJC, I have learned that history from all of you and can view it with dispassion. I wasn't here, so I am not invested in past dramas. That has given me the freedom to suggest new ideas and approaches that are not tainted by past experiences. Having met and spoken with so many of you, I have learned your concerns, your passions, and your anxieties, and am confident in our path forward as a community.

Looking ahead, we must have the courage to try new things, after careful consideration about costs and benefits to the whole community. Some new ideas will work; others won't. But the faith we require now is not only in God, or in a rabbi, but in each other. Everyone here wants the shul to succeed; we all want to feel affirmed in our spirituality, no matter the form it takes. And as rabbi, I want every one of us to be able to say: We are an inclusive shul, where different approaches are not merely tolerated but embraced as a positive ethic. As we approach the end of my first year as rabbi, we have committed ourselves to the path toward a promised land of our own: of fulfilling our potential as a happy, vibrant, inclusive, mainstream Conservative synagogue, positioned to meet a wide range of Jewish needs, and positioned for growth. We are on the road to that destiny but, unlike the Israelites, we must be willing to take a leap of action in order to inherit it. In the coming year, I look forward to seeing you beyond Canaan's border.