

Parshat Maasei - July 17 2020  
Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue  
Rabbi Leora Abelson

I got a text message this week from a young person who belongs to the congregation in Attleboro where I used to be the rabbi. She wrote, "I don't know why but when I passed the shul today I just started crying so I pulled into the parking lot and now I'm sitting in the parking lot of the synagogue and I'm sad and don't even know why."

It immediately made me think of Psalm 137, which has many famous musical settings, but what came to mind was Joey Weisenberg's interpretation:

By the waters of Babylon, we laid our lyres down, laid our lyres down, we sat and cried.

עַל נְהַרוֹת אֲבָבָל שָׁמַרְנוּ יְשֻׁבֵנוּ גַם-בְּכִינוּ

This young person's text message was describing an experience of exile, and perhaps I thought of that Psalm in particular because she is someone who loves to sing, and to sing together. I so deeply share her sadness that we cannot be together, singing together, for now.

The text message also made me think of my sister's child, Jesse, who is two and a half. He misses his school so much that they drive past it often, because seeing it closed and dark is reassuring to him - he needs to be reminded again and again that his teachers and friends are not playing and learning there without him. And even at two and a half, I know he feels a deep sadness when they drive by.

I remember the first time I walked down Centre Street after the pandemic really began, after schools and shuls, churches and libraries and businesses had closed. It was several weeks in - I hadn't had a reason to walk down Centre Street before that - and it was a warm early evening. Centre Street should have been bustling, but it was silent, shuttered. A few storefronts had encouraging messages in their windows, but they felt so feeble against the overwhelming sadness. As I passed one storefront after another, I thought about all the workers whose livelihoods depend on those businesses thriving.

We are all experiencing many layers of exile right now, and one of them is exile from the spaces we love to share - the spaces we love to share with specific people and community; the spaces we love to share for intentional purposes; the spaces we love to share with

strangers. We are acutely aware of the preciousness of these physical places, as we long to share them again.

Relationship to physical place is an important theme in the Book of Numbers, which we finish reading this week, the book whose Hebrew name, Bamidbar, means *in the wilderness* - the wilderness, which is both no place and many places.

We read a double portion this week, Matot and Maasei, both of which continue discussion about the future distribution of land, among the Israelite tribes, in Eretz Yisrael. The sense of longing for rootedness is very strong; there is a real dedication to the idea of landing in a place and staying there; being committed to it, and ensuring that your descendents get to stay in relationship to it. But in the midst of this discussion about settlement and possession of land comes a long list that gives *Maasei* its name - journeys. "Moses wrote of their comings forth and their journeys by the word of God. And these are their journeys and comings forth." And then we get the list: they set out from Ramses and camped at Sukkot. They set out from Sukkot and camped at Eytam. Forty-two places are named, and in places where notable things happened, Moses notes them. There is a real thematic contrast to the discussion of land and permanence: here, the reality of movement and change is affirmed; the list is a reminder of how important the Israelites' journey has been for their growth as individuals and as a collective. It is a reminder that just as the Israelites made many journeys, from bondage to freedom, so too, our lives are a series of journeys and comings forth.

That tension is present throughout the Torah, which at times is so oriented towards settlement and arrival, and at times so clearly embraces and elevates the journey itself.

This tension felt alive for me this week as I jumped into conversations about finding a new physical home for Nehar Shalom. Finding our new home was a huge undertaking before the pandemic began, and we now find ourselves in even more uncertain circumstances. I entered some powerful conversations this week about what we need from a physical space right now. Is it just storage? Is it office space? Is there something psychologically or spiritually important about having a physical home, even if we cannot gather in it? Is there a way even a small physical home could enable deeper connection somehow? What does it mean to have a physical, visible presence in the JP community? And what will happen to our community if we don't have a physical home for a long while?

In the Israelites' conversations about the land they are about to enter and how they will share it, all kinds of different values come up. As we talked about last week, land holds a tremendous amount of power, and it shapes both identity and the distribution of resources.

In Parashat Matot, two of the tribes come to Moses to say they would actually like to settle east of the Jordan river, rather than crossing it with the other tribes. Moses reacts with fury and hurt, clearly feeling like they are abandoning the collective. But for them, the land on that side is better for their cattle; they have different needs and values and it creates some serious conflict.

As our community continues the very material and logistical work of looking for a home space, we also have values work to do together. What do we want our future home to look like? To feel like? And more broadly, how do we want to continue to make our home in Jamaica Plain? What do you feel connected to here? What do you feel committed to? What makes *JP* feel like home?

Questions about home, and what makes a place feel like home, are always complex. They are complex because families are complex. They are complex because of gentrification and housing injustice. They are complex because of colonialism and displacement. They are also complex for Jews because exile is part of our core story. We read these parshiot during the three weeks leading up to tisha b'av, when we give our attention and emotional energy to our grief about the experience of *galut*, of exile. Arnold Eisen, in tracing the consistent experience of exile from the very beginning of the Torah, writes, "Home, for Jews... is... too good to be true... Exile proves to be the rule, not the exception. ...Home remains an affair of the imagination."<sup>1</sup> I don't totally agree with him; I think in all periods of Jewish history we have made home, real home, wherever we have lived. And I believe that tremendous strength and beauty comes from being a diasporic people. But reading these parshiot at this time in the Jewish year lifts up for me that the conversation about rootedness and movement is deeply shaped by the sacred stories we tell about exile and home, as well as by intergenerational trauma and intergenerational resilience.

I think it's easy to read the two themes of these parshiot as primarily in contrast with one another. To read the longing for and dedication to establishing permanence on the land as a kind of solution to the experience of movement, of journeying. But a teaching I learned from Rabbi Victor helps me see that in truth they are in creative, productive tension; that both learning how to be committed to and at home in a place, and being present for the ever-changing journey, are ongoing conditions of our lives.

The name of the first parsha we read this week is *matot*, meaning tribes, a word which also means staff or branch; and a phrase from the same root *natah ohel*, means to pitch a tent. The name of the second parsha, *maasei*, means journeys, and the root of that word means

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<sup>1</sup> *Exile*, by Arnold Eisen, in Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, eds. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, p. 220-1.

literally to pull out or pull up, as in pulling up tent pegs. We recite the long list of places where the Israelites camped in the wilderness to remember that their journey was not simply one long sojourn; it was a series of journeys, of arrivals and departures. In each place, they made camp, pitched their tents. They landed, they rooted, for however short a time. Sometimes miracles happened there, and sometimes they mostly kvetched. But they were there. Yes, they pulled up their tent pegs each time. But every place they were mattered.

So, too, with us. We are in a particular kind of *midbar*, wilderness, right now. We have the opportunity to be open to the learning and growth of the steps of this journey. We might find ourselves camping out in the parking lot of a beloved synagogue or school, longing to return. We might - we will likely - find ourselves sad without realizing why, sitting and crying. May we also embrace the opportunity of this part of our journey, to learn about what we really want our gathering spaces to be like, to learn, by being connected in new and different ways, what it means to be committed to our community, to one another, and to our neighborhood. Psalm 137 continues, in Joey's interpretation, with a plea not to forget:

*If I forget you Jerusalem, this hand will play no more again, play no more again, not one more time.*

We are not going to forget all the sacred gathering spaces we miss right now; and we know we will play and learn and sing together again. Even as we might pitch our tent and pull out its pegs a few more times before we feel settled somewhere, what we most love and treasure about this community will always travel with us.

When we finish leyning a book of Torah, we chant the words *hazak hazak v'nithazek*. Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened. It's a way of celebrating what we have finished and gearing up to begin a new book. We won't be leyning the last few lines of Sefer Bamidbar tomorrow morning, but let's chant it together anyway, to celebrate where we are and to strengthen ourselves for where we are headed: *hazak hazak, v'nithazek*.

Good shabbes!