

Like some of you, I do not find pure excitement in change. Actually, as my parents and husband can attest, that is probably the understatement of the year. As a kid, I balked at the idea of my parents redecorating any room in the house, because I would not know where things were. I spent the first month of summer camp every year mourning home and the second month mourning camp--- that was after all the histrionics of getting me on the bus in the first place. I have gotten a bit better as an adult- just a bit.

Change is a relearning of everything we thought we knew. Getting used to new stains on the walls and shapes on the ceiling. Adjusting our way of thinking to meet the new reality. Allowing oneself to become unsure while courageously facing the unknown head-on.

We, at The Community Synagogue, are all in that place right now. Beginning to know one another, to trust one another, continuing on the journey with new voices and different philosophies on the old words.

Not surprisingly, as Torah often parallels modern circumstances, the people Israel and their leaders are facing the transformative challenges in the Book of Deuteronomy. But rather than portraying the emotions and voices of the kahal, the congregation, the Torah focuses solely on the emotions of Moses, teacher and advisor to the Israelites for the past forty years. Moses knows that he will not make the passage into the Promised Land with his people. He will watch Joshua and Caleb fulfill this task,

taking the people to new heights, new adventures. And although the Torah is sometimes spare on revealing human sentiment, Parashah Va'etchanan offers interesting insight into Moses' character. Moses states: Va'etchanan el Adonai b'ei hahoo l'amor.

*I pleaded with Adonai at that time saying, Adonai, God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness, and Your mighty hand. You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven and earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan. But Adonai was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. Adonai said to me, enough never speak of this matter again.*

Moses is no longer the great intermediary between God and the people of Israel. He is a very real human being with longings and disappointments. We can only imagine the thoughts and emotions that Moses feels at this time. After 40 years as God's representative- counseling the Israelites, transmitting the word of God, channeling the people through a spiritual wasteland- Moses' job is done. He must pass the mantle of leadership to a new generation- to men with different qualities from his own. And therefore have no part in the realization of Israel's mission and the fulfillment of God's covenant. After 40 years of listening to the Israelites moan and complain, after serving, at times, as God's only advocate, he is not permitted to step into the holy land. There is no big pension for 40 years of service, no beach house in Elat, not even any recognition from God, Godself. For Moses, who has been preaching God's compassion and sense of justice, it does not seem fair.

A legend from Deuteronomy Rabbah recounts that when Moses learned his hour had come to step down he refused to accept it. He wanted to go on living- although he was old and tired of wandering through the desert and being constantly tormented by his people. The story goes, he put on sackcloth and ashes, composed 1500 prayers and then, drew a circle around himself and declared" I shall not move from here until the decree is revoked." And once more his words shook the universe to its very core. Heaven and earth in panic consulted one another. What was happening? Had God decided to put an end to creation?

There came to Moses' aid the Torah that bears his name. It pleaded with God to extend his life. Its intervention was unsuccessful. The fire of holiness joined the effort in vain and the sacred letters were rejected. Even the ineffable name- the holiest name of God- was turned down by God. Moses than pleaded on his own behalf- please let me live, let me step into the Promised Land. If you do Moses- God replied- than the people will turn you into an idol.

Don't you trust me? Haven't I done all that you asked of me? Shouldn't I be rewarded for my righteousness?

Moses, God asked, who are you?

I am the son of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I carry the tradition.

Where are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

They are dead, Moses replied and then he understood.

If I am to die, he asked, let me be Joshua's disciple for a few hours and study Torah in his presence. Let me be his student.

God granted his wish.

Rabbinic literature creates one of the most human portraits we have of our leader Moses. He does not want to let go-- of his professional role, his personal connection to the people- his people and of his purpose in life. And yet he is commanded to do so by God. The Israelites were as his children. He brought them through the desert of adolescence and taught them to stand on their own. He shouldered their anger and empowered their faith. He taught them the very difference between slavery and freedom- lessons they would need for entering their land. And now, at the very apex of attaining the goal, Moses needs to stop and allow the Israelites to continue their journey with another.

This pain of change is one we have all experienced. Be it from allowing a child to struggle through life's challenges, retiring from a treasured profession, or watching someone else take over the projects we nurtured. We fear that our absence will be left a void, forever unfilled. We fear that others will not care as much as we have, and that what we started will somehow be lost. Or that they will do things differently and we will be left behind in the process. These worries are valid and need to be acknowledged. It is difficult to step in a different direction- to step outside our comfort zone. And yet, transformation can lead to a more fulfilled life, a new chapter with a new set of goals and new strengths. We cannot tell what is behind a door, unless we walk forward through it.

Over two years ago, the synagogue where I worked in New Jersey went through a 5 million dollar building and renovation project. The end result was beautiful and state of the art. But even until last June- two years since the full completion of the new structure- congregants of over 40 years were still pausing outside my door, asking with a sense of dismay, directions to the main office, or how to get to the nearest parking lot. There was not a tremendous amount of architectural transformation, the doors to the parking lots in the same place, the office moved down ten feet, but even that small measure was enough to make people feel unbalanced. Their home looked a bit different, felt a bit different- and for a moment they lost their feeling of comfort. It was as if they had walked into an entirely new synagogue altogether.

And yet, before I left, I overheard one of our very active older members who refused even to walk through the new office area for fear of getting locked into the attic, giving a tour to her children and grandchildren. She stopped at every open door, explaining the changes that had been made, and how they made her life easier. Now, she could come into the main office and get everything done in one place. There was an elevator and a new beautiful bathroom, a water cooler with cups. I chuckled as I remembered her first reaction to the building and how she had adapted and seen the beauty in it. Enhancement of our reality can lead to the development and growth of the soul.

Moses acknowledged his pain internally and externally but when it was time for him to truly move on, he expressed only concern for the future of his people. Moses asked God to choose a leader who will go out before them and come in before them. Even in the moment of his transition, this wise leader recognized that the Israelites needed

someone whose qualities were different from his own. Not only did the people demand a true role model, but also one who possessed military prowess, important for going into an inhabited land. The Israelites were entering a new phase of peoplehood, requiring a different type of leadership. Moses could not go on the journey but he wanted to assure that his people reached the Promised Land successfully. And that their new leader would nurture them physically and spiritually.

There is a powerful lesson in this. We all have the ability to embrace change knowing that it may lead to a more spiritually fulfilled, connected life. Transformation, although difficult, allows us to grow and stretch into the people we are meant to be, into the community we are meant to be, into a land flowing with milk and honey. May we be blessed to continue together to the Promised Land, learning, connecting and developing along the way. An open heart, mind and soul are all it takes to shoulder the desert and come through more than whole.