

Shabbat Shirah 5779

19 JANUARY 2019 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Shabbat Shalom,

“Every young Chazan needs a zayde.” That adage, quoted in the name of the late great Cantor David Bagley, was the most important parting advice that my teachers gave to me as I left Jerusalem to come to Montreal. What did Bagley mean, that “every young Chazan needs a zayde”?

He meant that a young whippersnapper like me, 25 years old, fresh out of school and ready to conquer the world of synagogue music, should seek out and benefit from the experience of an elder. One who’s been around the block a few times, who has experienced and overcome all the scenarios that could shake the confidence of a young buck.

My reward for taking that advice to heart has been the special relationships that I’ve shared with the emeritus clergy of the congregations I’ve served in Montreal. Cantor Solomon Gisser and I lived in the same building on MacDonald and he quickly became an adopted grandfather while we shared many bachelor Shabbat meals. Rabbi Maurice Cohen and I shared a love for all things Boston (though he wasn’t much into sports) and his Harvard best-friend was actually the son of my father’s first rabbinic secretary. I had the blessing of their wisdom, the gift of their affection, and the honour to sing them into the next world. There is not a time when I am on the bimah that I do not think of them.

I reflect on all the aforementioned as I feel the weight of Shaar history on my shoulders standing here this morning. Not because this is my 15th Shabbat Shirah with you all, but because the last event that took place in this room prior to this morning’s service was the funeral of Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat. Today, I offer the first sanctuary sermon since his passing, from the spot that he occupied for longer than anyone else has or will in the history of this great congregation, and that is no small order.

Before I proceed, let me say that while I enjoy this annual foray into sermonizing, I do not want to be giving a sermon each week. But in some ways, I think it would be easier to speak each Shabbat than it is to mine the same Torah portion each year for 15 straight years in search of something new to talk about. Yet this year’s venture into B’shalach quickly brought me a sense of connection to and appreciation for the role that Rabbi Shuchat played for me, and I think for all of us.

Three sentences into this morning’s parashah we read the following:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עַצְמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph,

כִּי־הִשְׁבַּע הַשָּׁבִיעַ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר

who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying,

פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהָעֲלִיתֶם אֶת־עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה אֲתִכֶּם:

“God will surely remember you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

On the surface, there doesn’t appear to be anything exceptional here. The newly liberated Children of Israel are ready to pull out of slavery and onto the road to freedom. But Moses has something else on his mind: keeping a promise to one of his ancestors, the one who brought the Israelites down to Egypt in the first place: Joseph.

Joseph didn’t want to be buried anyplace other than his home and native land. But, as Egyptian viceroy, he realized that this request wouldn’t be looked upon favourably by Pharaoh. Indeed, the Torah notes that Joseph was embalmed, implying that he received an Egyptian state funeral.

We can also assume that Joseph must have heard of God’s prophecy to his great-grandfather, Abraham, that his descendants would be enslaved to Pharaoh for 400 years. So, Joseph charges his brothers with the promise to bring him home. They really owed him one, so they made the promise, and Moses fulfilled it by disinterring

Joseph's bones and taking them with him en-route to the Promised Land.

What's most interesting about this verse is that is an anomaly. A peculiar, perhaps even unique occurrence in the Chumash where the Torah actually quotes itself, nearly verbatim. If we look back to the penultimate verse of the book of Genesis, we see the words:

פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהָעֵלְתֶם אֶת־עֲצָמֹתַי מִזֶּה:

“God will surely remember you: then you shall carry up my bones from here.”

Now we see these words reappear, hundreds of years later. How is that possible? Who is the stenographer that's been keeping the record of Joseph's dialogue with his brothers, and how was the promise passed down during the many years of slavery?

The Babylonian Talmud asks the same question in Masechet Sotah, saying:

מִנֵּין הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ הֵיכָן יוֹסֵף קְבוּר

How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? The answer?

אָמְרוּ סֵרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר נִשְׁתַּיִּירָה מֵאוֹתוֹ הַדּוֹר

They said: “Serach, the daughter of Asher remains from that generation.”

Who?

The Torah records the name of one person, and one alone, who left famine-stricken Canaan and entered Egypt with the 70 members of Jacob's family, who then crossed the Red Sea and sang the song that gives this Shabbat its name, and who was counted in the census in the desert as detailed in the Book of Numbers.

That person is Serach, the daughter of Asher, and although more than 200 years pass by between the two Torah mentions of her name (making her one of the oldest women in our tradition), the Oral Torah gives her far greater significance. Sotah continues to say that Moses went to Serach and said: “Do you know where Joseph is buried?” She said: “The Egyptians buried him in an iron casket and placed it in the Nile so that its waters become blessed.”

The Talmud then describes a supernatural scene: Moses goes to the Nile and says “Joseph, Joseph, the time... for fulfillment of the oath that you administered to the Jewish people has arrived. If you show yourself, it is good, but if not, we are no longer bound by your oath.” Suddenly, his casket rises to the river's surface. The G'mara makes it clear that had Joseph's dying request not been honoured, the Israelites would not be able to leave Egypt. Serach knew what had to be done, and she saved the day.

Why was it crucial that Serach play a role in the redemption? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik answers this question in a 1960 eulogy for a senior colleague. He says “The generation of the Exodus witnessed signs and wonders on an unprecedented scale. Such excitement could easily lead to a sense that their generation represents true religious greatness and that nothing that came beforehand really matters. Yet this conclusion is false. *Every generation, irrespective of its accomplishments, needs to turn to its elders for counsel and wisdom.* The living example of someone who knew Jacob and Joseph was an invaluable resource for the generation of the redemption.”

Rabbi Shuchat's extraordinary longevity made him our Serach, our connection to our own Shaar Hashomayim ancestry. He stood on this bimah with our clergy forefathers, Rabbi Herman Abramowitz and Cantor Nathan Mendelson. He brissed, named, Bar and Bat Mitzvahed, married and buried many of your great grandparents, grandparents and parents. He also made sense of a century and a half of meeting minutes, bulletins, milestones, and legends, redacting them in quite a Mishnaic way and compiling them into “The Gate of Heaven,” the history he penned of our first 150 years. וְלֹאן אִתָּה הוֹלֵךְ. אֵלֶּיךָ יָבוֹאנוּ וְלֹאן אִתָּה הוֹלֵךְ. Know where you came from, and where you are going, Pirkei Avot tells us, and Rabbi Shuchat made sure that we did.

I know it's clichéd to say that “Without so and so, we wouldn't be here today.” But in the case of Shabbat Shirah and its Shaar tradition, it's not just a line. In “The Gate of Heaven,” Rabbi Shuchat writes that Shabbat Shirah at The Shaar underwent a “transformation...into a Sabbath liturgical concert.” He cites Cantor Mendelson's column in a February 1952 Bulletin. “I should like to pay tribute...to Rabbi Shuchat for suggesting the inauguration of a special Shabbat Shirah Musical Service. Regular worshippers will find...the addition of several especially prepared selections, some of which will be heard for the first time.”

So this morning, the Choir and I offer a Shabbat Shirah tribute to Rabbi Shuchat by singing three of his

favourites, compositions that we used to sing each year on the Shabbat closest to his birthday. We just sang his favourite Uvnucho Yomar by Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, whose great-grandson was the rabbi of Bryna and Josh’s congregation in Riverdale. We will close the service by singing his favourite melody of Adon Olam, written by Salomon Sulzer in Vienna, but beloved to Rabbi Shuchat because it’s the melody that is always sung to conclude the Rabbinic ordination ceremony at the Jewish Theological Seminary, his alma mater.

But most significantly, in Musaf we will sing the composition for the text that he loved most: Modim Anachnu Lach, the setting of the two parallel texts of gratitude that appear in our siddur, composed by Cantor Bernard Wladowski, arranged by Leo Low, and first performed at the Shaar on Shabbat Shirah, 1956.

Cantor Sid Dworkin said on Rabbi Shuchat’s passing that “Life was not always kind to him but...a better example of maintaining a positive outlook on life you will not find.” How did he maintain that positivity? Modim, a text that was precious to the Rabbi, provides the answer.

He was grateful to God:

- *al chayeinu*, for his life and the lives of those he loved,
- *al nishmoteinu*, for his soul that he nurtured through faith and scholarship,
- *al nisecha, nifl’otecha v’tovotecha*, for the miracles, wonders and kindnesses that were extended to him by the members of his beloved community,
- and he expressed this gratitude *erev vavoker v’tzahorayim*, every evening, morning and afternoon when he davened at the Shaar minyan that was so precious to him.

So why do I quote Rabbi Shuchat today? Because quoting Rabbi Shuchat at The Shaar is a little bit like the Torah quoting itself. And why does the Torah quote itself? The message is clear: we quote the things that are most precious to us. To remember tzadikim after they are gone is one of our most sacred Jewish values.

And now that Rabbi Shuchat is gone, how do we proceed? The same page in Masechet Sotah, in discussing the fact that the word *aron* is used for both the holy ark and for a casket, offers us a way forward:

וכל אותן שנים שהיו ישראל במדבר

All those years that the Jewish people were in the wilderness,

היו שני ארונות הללו

these two arks, accompanied them

אחד של מת ואחד של שכינה

one a casket, and one the Ark of the Covenant,

When they were traveling together, passersby would say: What is the nature of these two arks?

אמרו

They said in response:

קיים זה כל מה שכתוב בזה

The person in this one, fulfilled all that is written and contained in this one.

Rabbi Shuchat is no longer with us. He is in a better place, seeing, hearing and walking unencumbered, and reunited Miriam and Elizabeth. And we now move forward, carrying his legacy with us as an example to help us reach the land of congregational promise. So may it be for us on this Shabbat Shirah, and for the future generations of Shaar Hashomayim for many Shabbatot Shirah to come.

Amen, and Shabbat Shirah Shalom.