

**Shelakh lechah –
D'var for Rabbi Goldberg's thank-you Shabbat, 13 June 2015
Lynn Brooks**

In this week's parsha, we read of the Israelites undertaking an arduous endeavor, a fraught journey, to an end they think is near at hand: they're on the border of the land that God has promised them. All they have to do is to enter and take command. They appoint a committee of scouts to figure out the lay of the land and inaugurate the strategizing. This committee undertakes a course of action, a journey of its own. But, along the way, they encounter some monstrous obstacles, they lose heart, and the quick and smooth goal-achievement that seems promised, as b'nei Yisrael stands on the very border of their Promised Land, is disrupted. Instead, the Israelites must wander for a long time before their initial glimpse of the Promised Land is realized in actual possession.

Last year, the Temple Beth El congregation began an arduous endeavor, a fraught journey, to an end we thought was near at hand: the hiring of a new rabbi—in fact, of a pair of rabbis, after the retirement of R. Parnes. We appointed a committee of fearless and, in our case, faithful congregants to strategize our hiring journey. The committee dutifully, tirelessly undertook a course of action, a journey in its own right. But, along the way, they encountered some monstrous obstacles, and the quick and smooth goal-achievement, that seemed promised as we hired an experienced immigration lawyer and followed required steps, was disrupted. Instead, Temple Beth El has wandered for a far longer period than anticipated between one long-time rabbi, Stephan Parnes, and our next full-time hires (we hope), Rabbis Szuster and Pavolotzky. We have experienced our share of grumbling and dissension, but as we learned at our recent Annual Meeting, we pulled through and, by and large, we pulled together. Fortunately, we have had a wise, patient, and gracious spiritual leader to sustain us in this period of uncertainty.

This analogy—inexact, I admit—between the theme of this week's parsha and the current situation of Temple Beth El, allows me to acknowledge the tremendous importance of Rabbi Goldberg's contributions to our synagogue's journey. I'm not going to push the analogy further and identify Rabbi Goldberg with any of the leading figures in the parsha—Moses, Joshua, or Caleb—because I know he is too modest to accept such a comparison. And *modesty* is one of the several qualities that I wish to note in praising Rabbi Goldberg. Sometimes, alas, clerical leaders use their pulpits to highlight themselves, but nothing could be further from Rabbi Goldberg's approach. When he speaks from the bima, it is always to elucidate a text, to probe prayers and parshiot for deeper meaning, to wrestle with Jewish ethical concerns, or to acknowledge others for their contributions. Rabbi Goldberg is a channel for Jewish knowing, and he eagerly, warmly, and graciously shares with the congregation whatever knowledge and questions he brings forth. While he is a shining light himself, he never shines that light on himself.

I've addressed the rabbi's modesty, and I've alluded also to his *knowledge* and his *attitude of questioning*. That takes me to his second quality that I want to highlight. Rabbi Goldberg is a model of what the word *rabbi* means—that is, a teacher. And as anyone who has been a teacher knows, any good teacher is a lifelong learner. Rabbi Goldberg's constant study,

his evident grappling with sources, the questions he shares with us, and his surprise at some answers that he himself comes up with are a delight to share; these qualities and experiences help us to know how to be lifelong Jewish learners ourselves. His dvars are thoughtful and probing, stimulating and provocative.

Speaking of teaching and learning, I have loved observing Rabbi Goldberg's joy at working with our synagogue's children. Thus, I want to add to his fine qualities his playfulness. I delight in his smile, his laugh, his sense of wonder at the oddness and humor of life. God knows, as Jews we need such levity at times. Rabbi Goldberg is not only *playful*, but he is a team *player*—he jumped right into line to help out at our Food Festival, he has helped our congregants and non-congregant Jews in the community at times of need or celebration, he pitched into the Adult Education schedule with wonderfully enlightening programs on Jewish music, and he supports our bima leaders with his own singing.

That singing takes me to another quality of Rabbi Goldberg's that many of us have greatly valued—his *musicality*: his fine voice, his match-able pitch, his steady tempi in leading songs and prayers, and his ability to carry along our congregation as a whole at services. His deep knowledge of Jewish music not only informs his conducting of services, but also acquainted us with the delightful film, *A Cantor's Tale*, and cantorial practice, and alerted us to the breadth of Jewish liturgical traditions worldwide.

These are only some of the fine gifts that Rabbi Goldberg has brought to us. I know that many here can add to the list and I hope you will do so in speaking with the rabbi at our kiddush lunch. I can say personally that Rabbi Goldberg is a real *mensch*. I spoke to him about a particular problem I was facing, and he responded with empathy, intelligence, and generosity. I am sure that many of us have privately experienced those qualities and that we all thank him from our hearts.

So, while our fearless if somewhat fatigued scouts, pursuing the goal of our new-rabbi hire, continue to assess their strategies as they face the giant of the US Citizenship and Immigration Service, we as a synagogue have enormously benefited from the guidance and warmth of our interim rabbi, Geoffrey Goldberg. I feel that he was the perfect soothing balm for our ruffled congregation, and has provided us the sustenance and strength to continue on our current journey which, we anticipate, will be somewhat shorter than the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert.

Rabbi Goldberg, thank you for providing us the milk and honey of your knowledge, your thoughtfulness, and your generosity. We are deeply grateful that you will be with us a little longer, and please know that we wish you a rewarding sabbatical at Harvard, and hope we will have an opportunity to bring you back to Beth El to share with us the discoveries you encounter in your research.

Rabbi Goldberg, Shabbat shalom, and—from the heart—todah rabah.

Lynn Brooks