

Opening Yourselfes

Rabbi David Novak

Shabbat Vaera 27 January 2017/29 Tevet 5777

“Kotzer ruach” from this week’s parasha, Vaera, literally means “shortness of spirit.”

God is again speaking to Moses saying:

5 And I have also heard the moaning of the Children of Israel, whom Egypt is holding-in-servitude, and I have called-to-mind my covenant.

6 Therefore, say to the Children of Israel:
I am YHWH; I will bring you out
from beneath the burdens of Egypt,
I will rescue you from servitude to them,
I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, with
great (acts of) judgment;

7 I will take you for me as a people,
and I will be for you as a God;
and you shall know
that I am YHWH your God,
who brings you out
from beneath the burdens of Egypt.

8 I will bring you
into the land (over) which I lifted my hand
(in an oath) to give to Avraham, to Yitzhak, and to
Yaakov. I will give it to you as a possession,
I, YHWH.

9 Moshe spoke thus to the Children of Israel.
But they did not hearken to Moshe,
out of **shortness of spirit** and out of hard servitude.

Shortness of spirit. This amazing pledge of loyalty by the God of Israel to God's people, unable to be heard or experienced, because of shortness of spirit and hard servitude.

Kotzer ruach.

This is not the only time our ancestors demonstrated shortness of spirit.

From the time God commissions Moses to redeem the Israelite slaves through their 40 year journey through the wilderness we have been a people whose default disposition is shortness of spirit.

It reflects our impatience as a nation, wanting the result, immediately without having a process first.

But process is important. And our impatience gets in our way.

Here at ICM the process for choosing your new rabbinic leadership is one that is proceeding carefully, unfolding with the greatest concern and attention to the wants and desires of this congregation and its future.

Surveys were done. Results were tabulated. A carefully worded document describing the open position was created and published widely. Because ICM remains unaffiliated, the search is being done largely outside of the channels of the organized movements.

Dozens of resumes came in and were considered.

A subsection of the Search Committee chose to speak to candidates via Skype.

Based on their joint assessment of those calls, recommendations were made to the full committee to bring those candidates to visit ICM.

I don't have to tell you that the job of a rabbi--any rabbi-but especially of a rabbi for a small congregation in rural Vermont will take a special of person to do well.

Even though we value this congregation and what it brings to Southern Vermont and especially the Northshire, it will take the right combination of personality and desire to make a shiddach, a match.

It is important, in my opinion, that ICM congregants open yourselves to the treasure chest of possibilities about what the future rabbinic leadership of this congregation will look like. It may look familiar to you from the past--or it may look different.

Kotzer ruach. Shortness of spirit.

Since time immemorial we Jews have always gotten in our own way--either through our own actions or through being oppressed by others. And having experienced being oppressed, we allow that to seep into our beings, sometimes oppressing others as "less than."

We do this even when we know of our obligation from Torah to remember the feelings of the stranger because we were strangers. We, our ancestors, the people who had kotzer ruach, shortness of spirit, knew what it felt like in their DNA to be oppressed.

Like others who suffer at the hands of others, we turn our oppression on people we consider "other."

Remember growing up and hearing your grandparents use words such as "schvartza", "shiksa", "shlmiel", and "goyisha kop?"

These words, all Yiddishisms, in my opinion, are well-entrenched self-loathing reflected that we used to other human beings that we perceive are weak or less than.

Our liberated slave ancestors were no walk in the park, either. Along the way they gave Moses all kinds of grief:

Who chose you? Who is this God? You are going to lead us to death? Give us food like we had in Egypt? All the complaining and crying that was the bane of Moses' existence during the trek through the wilderness for 40 years.

I would like us to embrace patience and understanding as Jewish virtues.

I would also like us to be open to possibility about the diversity of rabbinic leadership in today's world.

This includes human beings of both genders.

This includes human beings who have chosen to be part of our people even knowing the hardships of our people from the past. These are people to be welcomed, even honored. In fact, they make some of the best rabbis.

This includes people who racially do not look like us. Central Synagogue in New York has an Asian-American rabbi. The chief rabbi of Uganda is a black man. We are a small people: those who want to lead us should be given the chance to do so without letting preconceived notions interfere.

As the process continues at ICM, it is my hope that the main criteria that people will use when meeting these candidates are do they inspire me? Will they provide me with pastoral care when I need it? Will they build community? Will they make ICM, this place that I value so very much, the strong, vibrant and enduring Jewish presence?

It is my hope that everyone will be open to the process and to welcome the candidates for what they may bring to this wonderful community.

Let me close, as I am want to do, with a Broadway lyric. As the wonderful Rogers and Hammerstein musical South Pacific that premiered in 1948 said:

*You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

Let us rise above this.