

Beshallach Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro

January 15, 2011 / 10 Sh'vat 5771

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you, Rabbi Krupnick, for this opportunity.

Do you smell it? It smells like *shabbes*, right? (For those of you reading this who were not in attendance, the smell of *cholent* was permeating the entire *shul*!)

I would like everyone to take a minute and think about some of the greatest moments in your lives. Focus in on one of those memories. What were you doing? Who was there? Reflect on how you were feeling...enjoy that feeling for a moment.

In your mind, what word would you use to describe it? Depending on when it was, or perhaps on your age, you might have said, "groovy" or "cool", maybe you thought "rad" or "bad" or "neat-oh". Chances are you thought **amazing** or even **awesome**!

Awesome. What does the word awesome mean? What inspires awe? What defines an awesome moment?

I was thinking about Moses and Miriam and the children of Israel and the truly awesome moments they experienced. Imagine, in this week's *parasha*, witnessing the parting of the Red Sea...how **awesome** is that!?!!

At the end of the Torah, the people of Israel come before Moses, who is now 120 years old and will soon die. They come before him to hear one last word, one last summation of wisdom and truth. After everything he has experienced, this is what he says to them:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life."

When I was younger, I thought this was just a shallow cliché. After all, who wouldn't choose life? Life then was filled with nothing but light and possibilities. Now that I've lived and learned a bit, I realize: This is one of the most difficult commandments in the whole Torah to fulfill, but I also think it is one of the most important.

Behind the imperative "choose life" lies a frightening reality. I have seen it over and over again. The people who come to see me are all different but the yearning is the same. I suspect all of us have waited for good fortune to rain down on us. We wait for love, wait for that big break, wait for the life we dreamed of, wait for the life we want to finally begin. We tell ourselves life would begin if certain pieces fall into place: when I lose weight, when I fall in love, when I get a job, when I get married, when I have a family, when I buy a home, when I get divorced, when I get well, when my loved one gets well.

We tend to focus on the big events, the special events; the next holiday, birthday, the birth of a baby, the New Year. So many of us go through life saying to ourselves; if only I had a better life, if only I had more money, if only I had this or that, my life would be better.

I understand that thought process. But you know, we have a saying in our family: "*If my Bubbie had a beard, she'd be my Zaide.*" Sometimes, you can't change the reality of your life. And you can't live your life wishing things were different than they are.

I would venture to guess that almost everyone here longs for something, or has suffered, or has gotten confused or stuck or lost. That is what it means to be human.

I am reminded of that old joke about a Jewish mother who is walking on the seashore with her little boy. Suddenly a huge wave comes and sweeps the boy out to sea. The mother gets down on her hands and knees, looks up to the heavens and prays, "Bring him back to me G-d, just save him. I'll do anything. I'll never complain again."

And, suddenly, another huge wave comes and washes the boy back to shore as good as new. The mother hugs and kisses her son, then she looks the boy over and shouts to G-d, "He had a hat!"

Each one of us has stories. We have all had varying degrees of trials and tribulations. What I think I have learned from the difficulties in *my* life is perhaps one of life's most important lessons: Either we live on purpose. Or we live by accident. We can allow the *tzores* and challenges of life to define us, to derail our lives, or we can choose to fashion a life of blessing and light even when darkness encircles us.

Heschel, in one of his most poignant teachings, offers us the proper disposition to attain a life of meaning. "It takes three things", he says, "to attain a sense of significant being. G-d, a soul, and a moment; and the three are always present. G-d, a soul, and a moment.

G-d:

There is a verse in the Torah that says that Moshe approached the fog where G-d was. A life with G-d doesn't mean a life of clarity. Life is uncertain, life is unfair, life is chaotic. G-d is in the fog. We don't have to search for holiness anywhere else but in our imperfect, hectic world. We all imagine that the real life we yearn for is somewhere off in the distance, but the real life we're searching for is here in the fog.

A Soul:

A soul needs nourishment; it needs to grow, to be engaged, to be challenged, to be transformed by all that life offers us.

We come before the Torah for an *aliyah*. What are the words of the blessing we say? *Asher natan lanu torat emet*, we thank G-d for giving us the Torah of truth, *v'chayei olam nata b'tocheinu*, eternal life G-d plants in us. Eternal life is not found after death, but right here in us, in this world, right now in our own lives. We can grace our souls with eternity.

A moment:

We all know people who die unhappy, unfulfilled, dreams left undone, relationships left untended, projects left unfinished. No one knows how much time they have in this world.

The events of this week brought that message home all too clearly; the tragedy in Arizona and the sudden death of my friend, Debbie Friedman, *zichrona livracha*. Debbie was unquestionably the most prolific, spiritual, transformative Jewish songwriter of our time.

We first met when I was a young girl and I vividly remember being moved by her energy and her passion. I later had the honor of singing with her several times in concert and teaching with her in seminars. For a while, she was our neighbor in San Diego and I have to say that I feel blessed to have known her.

If you think you are not familiar with Debbie's music, I will give you a few samples from among her hundreds of compositions:

(For those NOT in attendance, we sang these together. You can look them up or I can sing them for you.)

Havdallah blessings.

Mi Shebayrach (prayer for healing that we sing together at the Torah on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur)

Alef Bet (I sing on Friday mornings at our ECC shabbat)

On Wednesday night, I participated in a Cantors Assembly benefit concert where we sang Debbie's *L'chi Lach*, in tribute...that she may rest in peace. Debbie Friedman's music will live on in all of us. We pray, *Yehi Zichrah Baruch*.

In fact, you will hear *Shir Nefesh*, our Hebrew High A capella choir, singing her *L'dor Vador* in the *musaf kedusha*. Let me take this opportunity to say how proud I am of all 3 of Beth El's choirs. I have so much fun with all of them and they continue to inspire me.

By now, most of you know my catch phrase that I use with all of my students: LOUD and PROUD. But, the catch phrase that I would like to say is "**Be in the moment!**" Don't worry about the party, or the D.J. or the food right now. Look at the life you have created, standing on the *bima*, becoming a Jewish grown up in front of your eyes. Be in this awesome moment.

Forget your text messages, emails and facebook and look your family members and friends in the eye when you speak to them. Be in the moment. When *b'nai yisrael* crossed the sea, Miriam and the women took timbrels in their hands and sang to G-d. *And the women dancing with their timbrels, followed Miriam as she sang her song...*that is yet another Debbie Friedman song. They were in the moment.

Mah Norah HaMakom Hazeh. How awesome is this place and this very moment!

Let us learn that every life just as it is right now has its own unique power and lesson to teach. Every day has its story. Every dream holds a lesson. Every life, however brief or long, holds the promise of a life of significance, meaning and holiness.

Uvacharta Bachayim. Choose life.

Choose a life of purpose, a life of significance. Choose a life of holiness, a life of relationships.

Choose a life of mitzvot, a life of love.

Recognize and enjoy every awesome moment!