

PARSHAT NOAH  
OCTOBER 21, 2017  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

We are all on a journey. Rabbi Alvin Fine wrote: “Birth is a beginning and death a destination. And, life is a journey... a sacred pilgrimage.” Wherever we are on that journey it is important to reflect on it and evaluate our destination. It is also worthwhile to recognize that sometimes we must stay the course and other times change our direction.

Most of our portion this morning is about Noah and the story of the flood. However, the end of our Torah portion is a prelude to a new episode, a journey which had an enormous impact upon the history of ideas and our people. Terah and his family embark on a journey. The Torah informs us: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson, Lot, son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law, Sarai, the wife of Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan.” However, the journey was aborted: “But when they came as far as Haran, they settled there.” We do not know why Terah began the journey or why it ended in Haran where Terah died. What we do know is that, as we continue the story in the Torah, Abram’s journey emerges from his father’s original quest. The difference between father and son, from this perspective, lies in their willingness to stay the course, to complete the journey. Terah may have begun his journey with great hopes, but it was prematurely ended. He disappears into the mist of history. Abram picks up where his father leaves off, completes his father’s journey, and changes human history forever.

What made Abram’s journey so significant? We learn in next week’s Torah portion that he followed G-d’s command to go to a land that was promised to him where he would be the father of a great nation. Maimonides states that Abram’s mission was to tell the entire world of the faith in one G-d. He was the first person to understand the concept of monotheism, to have everyone call the G-d of Israel, their personal G-d. His message was both universal and optimistic. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, on the other hand, states that the mission of Abram was not a universal one, but to be the father of the Israelite nation, to lead this particular people into the service of G-d.

Our personal journey is critical for the welfare of the Jewish people. Some of us recognize that sacred journey and establish our lives based upon Jewish values, the Jewish calendar, Jewish rituals and a belief both in our people and in our G-d. Others find meaning in a more universal approach to life, also basing themselves on legitimate Jewish values. Though all of us may not see ourselves necessarily on a Jewish journey, I would suggest that we never really stray far from it.

I am not on Facebook. Perhaps one day, but not now. However, two of the major principals involved in Facebook have taught us important lessons concerning the Jewish journey. As you know, Facebook has been accused of having had at least 3,000 ads on its site which seem to have been placed by a Russian agency in order to influence the 2016 presidential election. There have also been targeted ads that have expressed hatred and racism. Whether it was out of convenience or conviction, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, wrote on his own page, a post-Yom Kippur message: “Tonight concludes Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Jews when we

reflect on the past year and ask forgiveness for our mistakes. For those I hurt this year, I ask forgiveness and I will try to do better. For the ways my work was used to divide people rather than bring us together, I ask forgiveness and I will work to do better. May we all do better in the year ahead, and may you all be inscribed in the Book of Life.”

I don't want to deal with the exact issue, but I do see in this posting a part of the Jewish journey of Mark Zuckerberg. It was not happenstance that he used post-Yom Kippur to express values of contrition and atonement. Clearly his Jewish journey includes reflective moments based on Jewish sanctified time. His posting was a public expression of the purpose of Yom Kippur.

The Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, lost her husband, David Goldberg, tragically in May 2015. She found him collapsed on the gym floor, after he had a cardiac incident, as he was exercising on a treadmill. He died instantly. Sandberg's loss was portrayed publically and she expressed her deep mourning through Jewish rituals of death and burial, of Shiva and Kaddish. In a long posting on June 3, 2015, she wrote: “Today is the end of Sheloshim for my beloved husband, the first thirty days. Judaism calls for a period of intense mourning, known as Shiva that lasts seven days after our loved one is buried. After Shiva, most normal activities can be resumed, but it is the end of Sheloshim that marks the conclusion of religious mourning for a spouse.” She then went on to express her deep sense of loss and the courage that she and her family need for her and her family to continue to move forward.

In her book *Option B – Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* written with Adam Grant, she expresses Jewish rituals that have been helpful to her, including the recitation of Kaddish, the singing of “Oseh Shalom”, and the sense of resilience she got from the community that cared deeply about her and her family members.

I was impressed that both of these individuals, who in a very public way, expressed their Jewish journey either through a Jewish lifecycle event or the holiday season. Hopefully, it we can make us appreciate a little more that our Jewish journey must incorporate these values as well.

I believe that as a Jewish people we are tied to one another. We may have our individual journeys, but it is also a common path on which we stride. Some, like Terah, may never reach the sought-after destination. However, whether we like it or not, we are all on that journey. There is a concept known as *The Pintele Yid* which is described as that tiny part of a Jew that never quits – the little spark of Jewishness that is indestructible. No matter how hard someone may want to leave it behind, there is some part that simply can't run away. *The Pintele Yid* burns in the soul of every Jew, whether they know it or not. It is simply waiting to be fanned into a brighter flame, a passionate fire, an all-consuming purpose. It is our task to make sure it does not go out, to create out of that little flame a burning torch.

In the Jewish world in which we live we can easily blend in with the majority culture. We don't need to change our names anymore. While anti-Semitism does exist, to a large extent in the western world we are an accepted part of society. No, not every Jewish community is safe and secure, and our beloved State of Israel has not had a day of total peace. Yet, if we look back over the centuries and the numerous persecutions, expulsions, annihilations, and pogroms, we must admit that today we are all very blessed.

A pastoral letter was released this week by the leaders of the Conservative/Masorti Movement on Covenantal Love and Responsibility. It reiterated that rabbinic affiliation at weddings is restricted to a marriage between two Jews. In the letter Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson also writes that, “Our covenantal responsibility is to help Jewish families maximize their Jewish identity, Torah observance and faithfulness. We do that by creating synagogues, schools, camps and communities in which the quality of Jewish life is uplifting and inviting for all. We do that too by teaching a Torah that fuses traditional text study, contemporary academic tools, prophetic justice, and deep spirituality”.

Not all members of our people are up to the task of participating in that part of the Jewish journey. There are those who do live full Jewish lives and pass on their legacy from one generation to the next. However, it is also our task to make sure that others who may not be comfortable on that path be brought along as well. Thus, we must ensure that Jewish youngsters go to Jewish pre-schools; that all young Jews of elementary age attend either day schools or afternoon religious schools; that our teenagers are involved in youth groups, Jewish summer camps, and Israel experiences. We must promote serious adult learning. We need to train new Jewish leaders to take the roles of those who currently hold leadership positions. We are only as strong as our weakest link. In order for us to continue communally on the path that Abram set out for us, we must be open to those who want to walk the path with us. Funding must be available, leaders must be trained, communal priorities and standards must be set, and we need to follow through on those goals.

In addition to that focus, I know, there are others who are interested in joining with us. When the Israelite nation left Egypt they were accompanied by an *Erev Rav*, a mixed multitude. People wanted to be part of the Israelite journey. They were not interested in Egyptian society which would enslave others. They wanted to be part of a new mission in which personal freedom was treasured and in a faith that believed in the sanctity of each human being.

The Kabbalah mentions a category called *Zerah Yisrael*, literally the seed of Israel. What it means is that even those who may not be legally, halachically, Jewish, have sparks of Jewishness in them. These may be individuals who eventually convert to Judaism, they may be those whose fathers are Jewish but whose mothers are not, they may even be those who are searching for their Jewish soul and have not yet found it. They must be encouraged to join us on our mission and on our journey.

As Rabbi Artson writes: “We do this by seeing each individual as the distinct and precious locus of the Divine image that they are. And we do that by affirming the significance of choosing to personally affiliate with this ancient and holy covenant, or not. One consequence of this nuanced approach is that we continue to prioritize the value of conversion as the primary way of sharing the blessing of Jewish identity and family when one of the parents is not born Jewish.”

I agree and, therefore, I believe that for the sake of the Jewish people both here and, especially, in Israel, we must work to make conversion laws more lenient in order to welcome those who want

to join us be part of our journey. There are ample halachic decisions which allow for that and which make the legal case for bringing more people onto our communal journey.

I believe that every Jew has within himself or herself the *Pintele Yid* which continues to burn. We must ignite its flames. I believe there are also those who wish to join with us and who can become an integral part of our people and our faith. With the right education, direction, and priorities, all who will see the beauty and sanctity of Jewish life that will make us a stronger people.

Terah started the journey, he was not successful in reaching his destination. His son Abram, along with his wife Sarai, picked up the journey and reached their destination, the Promised Land. They established a new people, a new faith, and through us their journey continues. May we continue that journey, and may we be successful in creating a Jewish life which is vital, vibrant, and meaningful for us, and serve as an example to all people on earth.