

Marching Together
Temple Beth David Sisterhood Shabbat 2017
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Dedicated to the Jewish women who have paved the path before me...

I have a distinct memory of sharing the news with my family that I had been accepted to rabbinical school, back in 1997. Most of my family was excited and proud. I recall that my beloved grandmother, of blessed memory, said something to the effect of, “is that something for a nice Jewish girl to do?”

She didn’t mean to be critical. It’s just that even in the ‘90’s, more than twenty years after the first woman had been ordained as a rabbi, it wasn’t exactly the norm.

For thousands of years, Jewish women have pushed the boundaries, stretched the ceiling, and taken bold steps to make our voices heard in Torah, in prayer, and in our communities.

A humorous Yiddish story illustrates this struggle. There is a Yiddish greeting among women, “*Skotsl kumt*,” which means, “You’re here!” There is no definitive explanation for this practice, but the story attempts to answer why this is said:

Because it seemed like everything important in the world belonged to men, the women decided to make their unhappiness known to God, the Master of the universe, by building a tower of women, one on top of the other, until they reached heaven. Because Skotsl was clever, wise, and good with words, the women chose her to be at the top of the pile in order to voice the women’s complaint to God. But just before Skotsl reached the top of the tower, it collapsed. In all the confusion, the women tried to locate their friends. To their surprise, Skotsl was nowhere to be found. Thus their situation remained as it had been, and no change was made in their status. Yet women still hope that Skotsl will return in order to talk to God, and that is why they welcome each other with the greeting, “*Skotsl kumt*, You’re here!”

In this women’s version of the Tower of Babel, the women work together to approach God, to make their claim on Jewish life. They reject the way the world is. They desire to make a change. The story ends with a message of hope; that a time will come when women’s voices and leadership will be part of the norm. Maybe Skotsl didn’t disappear. Perhaps, as my teacher and colleague Rabbi Jackie Ellenson points out, Skotsl went out into the land, and everywhere she went, she initiated a new tower of women, pushing them to reach for the heavens, to feel close to God. And everywhere the women found more groups of women, taking the possibility of change everywhere. The builders remain optimistic. Their hope pushes them to work together, to work harder, to create a better world for women and for men. (*The Sacred Calling, Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, CCAR 2016).

The story reminds me of what it felt like to participate in the Women's March for America in Boston last Saturday. While we didn't physically pile up to the sky, cheering voices rose high, and we crowded very closely together. Exceeding initial expectations of 20,000 marchers, over 175,000 women, men, and children came out to the Commons to stand for justice, inclusion of diversity, reproductive rights, gender pay equity, health care, and the human and civil rights of all citizens. Similar record-breaking crowds emerged all over the country including our nation's capitol, with over 5 million people marching around the world.

Our Beth David group was over 20 strong including teens with many other TBD members interspersed throughout the crowds, many of whom are here tonight. We began with the traditional traveler's prayer for safe journeys, recited in a circle outside of Park Street station.

From the moment our brave Temple Beth David group set forth on our journey, we were surrounded by kind strangers. From the T employees who let us board for free, to the Unitarian church group I met on our Red Line train. All day long, buoyed by enormous crowds of people, I never experienced pushing or shoving or jostling of space. Never any violence. It was the opposite. The leaders of the march invited everyone multiple times to turn and meet a stranger. People shared snacks and drinks, helped children, linked arms, listened to inspiring speeches, and raised our voices in unity, urgency, and hope. People came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Signs conveyed powerful and creative messages. A colleague of mine wore a sign that said, "Nasty Woman Rabbi." Many at the march shared the disbelief that here in 2017 we need signs that say, "Women's Rights are Human Rights."

At one point on the Commons, an African American woman turned to me. She said, "Can I ask you a question?" I replied, "sure." She looked at me and said, "I didn't know that women could wear those," pointing to my *kipa*. "Why are you wearing it? I have only seen men wear them." Somehow I had missed the memo on the pink knitted hats, so I guess my rainbow *kipa* stood out a bit in the sea of pink. I explained to her that I am a Reform Rabbi, and that I was there with members of my congregation. I told her how in Reform and Conservative Judaism, men and women are completely equal, and that women, too, can wear a *kipa*, as a sign of respect and Jewish identity." She replied, "I like that, very cool, thank you." This encounter summarizes a day that was made up of short conversations and small steps.

The interesting thing about our march experience is that our Temple Beth David group which started together never actually made it to the designated marching route. There were simply too many people. We spent hours taking very small steps across the Commons. This got me thinking about how a march is not only about reaching the destination, but about the significance of each step along the way. The Women's March was a test in patience, an acknowledgement of fear for our future, and a challenge to embrace the power of the moment, moments that were filled with a little discomfort, and a lot of compassion and vision. The message coming from the organizers now is that the

march was a beginning; there are many other steps to take to continue to make sure that all voices are heard.

Our ancestors intimately understood this step-by-step approach to movement and change. For me, and many other rabbis and Jews around the world, there was special significance to this march taking place just as we started to read from the book of Exodus in our weekly Torah cycle. The Israelites took the long way through the wilderness, a forty-year march from slavery to the Promised Land.

Our Torah portions last week and this Shabbat, reveal the Israelite people bent and oppressed by Pharaoh and the cruel taskmasters. On the one hand, it would seem that they were “holding out for a hero,” waiting for Moses to grow into adulthood to come let the people go and lead them through the sea. (Rabbi Marci Bellows, ReformJudaism.org) However, a closer look at the Torah leads us to celebrate a number of important acts of resistance, bravery, and compassion, each one paving the way toward exodus. Each one of these acts is performed by a woman.

First, we quickly learn about the courageous rebellion of two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who did not follow Pharaoh’s command, and instead, saved each Israelite baby boy. It is amazing that we learn their names, and that they succeeded in saving countless lives. With each daring step, these two women changed the story forever.

Against this backdrop, we also meet Yocheved, who gives birth to Moses and chooses to hide him, and then one of our greatest heroines, Miriam, enters the picture. Miriam watches over her brother as he floats along the Nile. Pharaoh’s daughter then steps forward, deciding to raise a Hebrew child on her own, with help from Miriam and Yocheved. And later on, Moses’s Midianite wife, Tziporah, takes it upon herself to circumcise their son so that he can take his place among the Israelite community. Each woman stood on the shoulders of her sister.

Our Torah highlights these six women imbued with incredible strength, compassion, and *chutzpah*. They demonstrate how small courageous steps can make a difference. Like women often do, these biblical ancestors looked at the situation before them, took bold and practical steps, and got things done. They succeeded in moving our people forward, a little closer to the Promised Land.

As Jews, we come from a long line of marchers and visionaries. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said when he was marching from Selma with Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., “it felt like our feet were praying.” Together, even today, we all pray with our minds, hearts, hands and feet as we dream of a more just world.

There is one other lesson I would like to share with you tonight that we learn from this week’s Torah portion. *Parashat Vaeira* contains the first seven of the ten plagues that God cast upon Pharaoh and Egypt. Each plague brought more suffering, and each time Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. The text repeatedly tells us that God

“hardened his heart.” Many have been troubled by this image. Why was Pharaoh so stubborn and obstinate?

History has demonstrated that usually more good can happen when leaders hearts begin to soften, when their minds become more open. And we know that this softening often begins at home, on our streets and in our own communities. When we can look a stranger face to face, our hearts soften. When we march together, our hearts soften. When we act with courage and with compassion, our hearts soften.

Last week I experienced so very many people softening hearts, opening minds, and standing up for decency and equality. We are all still marching. The glass ceiling has not yet been shattered – not in Judaism, not in Israel, not in the U.S., or around the world. In the words of my mentor and the third woman to be ordained a rabbi, Rabbi Laura Geller, when women’s and men’s voices are around the page and at the table, the conversation is richer, more inclusive, more meaningful, more accessible, and more real. (*The Sacred Calling*) Skotsl is here. We may not have reached the Promised Land, but we are on our way.

Baruch ata Adonai, shomei’a t’filah – Blessed are You, Holy One, who hears our prayer.