

“Moving Our Mishkan”  
Rabbi Judith Schindler, Temple Beth El, Charlotte, NC  
Shavuot 5769/2009

As Jews, we are experts in wandering the wilderness. We have spent the bulk of our history in lands foreign to our own: from the Israelites in slavery, to those exiled from Jerusalem by the Babylonians and Romans, to many of our own parents and grandparents who endured being cast from their homes in Nazi-occupied Europe.

As Jews, we are so skilled in creating a home wherever we are, that in 1990, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet whose people had lost their Temple and their land to China, brought eight of our Jewish religious leaders to India to ask the all important question: How have we, as a Jewish people, maintained our identity and our faith for two millennia in Exile?

The Jewish leaders and even the author who captured the story in his book The Jew and the Lotus wondered whether any true wisdom could be conveyed. Rodger Kamenetz, the writer, remarked that he was concerned whether these two groups of people would even be able to communicate: “Monks are inclined to silence and Jews like to yak.”

In traveling far away the skeptic and non-believer Kamenetz found his way back to Judaism – the tradition of his birth. He wrote, “As the best fables teach us, sometimes you have to go far away to find your way back home.”

As the Dalai Lama learned, as Jews (though we might complain) we are adaptable, we are flexible, we will ultimately do what we need to do to survive and to thrive. We maintain our Jewish celebrations of the calendar and of our lives wherever we find ourselves.

Our wilderness wandering, that we begin today, is nothing compared to any Jew who came before us. We are in the Sam Lerner Center at the Levine JCC which is from exile... we have a sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi just around the corner. We are but yards away from our Bernstein Educational Building where our offices reside and less than 500 feet from our own Beth El sanctuary. We have the same fine foods for preneg and delicious desserts for oneg baked by Chef Lori Pearson. We have our Cantor and his gifts of music and his keyboard. We have our dynamic and diligent staff.

We have beautiful artwork that captures our values: the first piece reflecting our inclusion of all human beings and our connections to the fruits and beauty of Israel with which we are so close. The second piece captures our commitment to the letters and wisdom of our Torah, to the light of festivals, to music, to a dove pursuing peace. Most importantly, we have each one of us. Our community is outstanding in every way.

Today the Jewish world celebrates the second day of the holiday of Shavuot – of standing at Sinai. The Torah was given in the wilderness our Sages say, “Because just as a

wilderness is ownerless and available to everyone, so the Torah is not the domain of an elite few but rather is available for anyone who wishes to come and partake of it."

Rabbi Shlomo Goldman Shlita of Union City, New Jersey, offered another reason why the Torah was given in a wilderness. When one gives a gift, the quality of the wrapping paper and other trappings that are required is inversely proportional to the quality or value of the gift itself. A truly valuable gift speaks for itself. Likewise, the amount of spice that a dish of food needs is inversely proportional to the quality of the food itself. The Torah is the greatest gift; thus, no trappings were needed when the Torah was given and the Torah was given in a wilderness.

Perhaps this place, this beautiful wilderness of sorts, will enable us to hear Torah in a new way. Perhaps this experience of creating our sacred space each and every week, will enable us to celebrate not physical structures but the spirituality and personality that each of us bring.

Wherever we have gone... from the wilderness of Sinai, to the wilderness of Babylonia in early days, to the wilderness of our lives, we have always created a mishkan, a Tabernacle, in which to pray, in which to gather community, in which to utter our prayers of petition, of thanksgiving, and praise.

May our mishkan, our portable Tabernacle here in the Sam Lerner center, like the first Tabernacle of our Torah which we carried in the dessert, be filled with the light of God's presence, with the warmth of community, and with faith in the future. Amen.

## READING UPON LEAVING THE SANCTUARY OF BETH EL

### READER 1:

It was 66 years ago, on January 1, 1943, that a small group gathered first to have Shabbat services and then to announce the founding of a new congregation, Temple Beth El. They met in a room above Downtin's Grocery store at 1412 ½ Morehead Street in Charlotte. Harry Golden wrote our first constitution.

### READER 2:

In 1946, we were 46 families. In 1948, ground was broken for our new building and by January of 1949, we held our first service at 1727 Providence Road (where Dore Academy now stands). Over nearly five decades, traditions began that sustain us today: the annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service and the annual Retreat at Wildacres in the Blue Ridge Mountains every Labor Day.

### READER 1:

By the Temple's 40th birthday in 1983, the congregation had 320 families. In 1987, Temple Beth El merged with Temple Beth Shalom, and a new era began and a vision and need for a new building. Five years later, the dream became reality as the Torah was placed in the new Shalom Park sanctuary of Temple Beth El right here in August of 1992.

### READER 2:

Today we flourish with 1100 families. We are in our 66<sup>th</sup> year. We have more than 1,000 Kindergarten through twelfth grade students, hundreds of Hebrew High Schoolers, Tot Shabbat, an active youth group program, an active 20's-30's program, an active seniors program. We have something fun and meaningful for every age and stage of life. Inclusive, spiritual, warm, embracing, moving, fun, and a family is how people describe us.

### READER 1:

Over our past 16 years in this building – we have grown. We have grown our programming. We have grown as a staff. We have grown in celebrations. Last year, in 2008, we celebrated dozens of births, dozens of weddings, 55 B'nei Mitzvah. Our success is due to all of you...

### READER 2:

Now our Beth El journey continues. Now marks the beginning of our physical journey through the renovation and expansion of our first Shalom Park Beth El building. May our journey be blessed. May Beth El continue to grow and thrive and create a vibrant and vital Jewish community in Charlotte. May we continue to share the light of our faith with our children and with our community. Amen.