

From the Rabbi

March 2020 Adar 5781

“In the First Month of the Second Year”

As of the day of this writing, March 4, 2021, we have entered the first month of the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are at almost the exact spot on our trip around the Sun as our ancestors in the wilderness were when they realized they had completed the first year of their epic journey. They must have done something similar to what we are doing now. They must have reminisced, recalled, recounted, and recalibrated for the road ahead. They must have gone through their agenda from the past year:

The “seder” in Egypt; the horrific Tenth Plague; the morning of departure; the frightful first days of trekking along the coastline; the changing of course away from the Philistine war zone; stopping at the Red Sea; hearing Pharaoh’s army approaching; panic; the sea miraculously parting; hiking through the sea bed with the walls of water looming on both sides; reaching the far shore; seeing Pharaoh’s army enter the sea; the waters closing in on the Egyptians; the grateful “Song of the Sea”; the incessant complaining about water and food; the miracle of manna and the lesson of Shabbat; Amalek’s cruelly cynical attack; trekking to the Mountain of God; waiting as Moses ascended to receive the Torah; losing faith and patience; convincing Aaron to build the Golden Calf; Moses’s angry return; the smashing of the Tablets; the punitive plague; Moses’s second ascent and return; the new Tablets; the tedious months-long task of

building the Mishkan/Tabernacle, one plank and one socket at a time; the equally tedious task of garbing the High Priest Aaron.

Now, a year into the journey and still camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Mishkan was ready to go. The long ordeal surely seemed to be over. The people had survived. The future seemed attainable, even bright. Here is the text in Exodus chapter 40:

*“In the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, the Tabernacle was set up...When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Eternal filled the Tabernacle.”*

It sounds like a happy ending to an unprecedented year of ordeal. Would that it were so simple. Students of Torah know that more travails lay ahead.

Wouldn't it be nice if we ourselves could so smoothly and easily “go back to normal” merely by opening our own “tent of meeting” and moving forward. But our ancestors' story hardly ended there, and neither will ours.

We will certainly move forward, but only in fits and starts, and only by paying close attention to the “Torah” we have been forced to learn in these last twelve months. We have learned about the disappointing limits of our faith and patience; about the inequities in our society, and our “slave mentality” ways of dealing with those injustices; about our mistrust of one another and one another's “tribes”; and about our unpreparedness to respond to complex and unknown collective hardships.

But we have also learned about selfless heroism; about the human capacity to channel God's mercy into deeds of assistance, healing, and compassion; about resilience in the face of fear; about the goodness of people beyond our own race, religion, gender, tribe, and even political affiliation. We have been reminded of what a remarkable divine gift is ours in the form of free will, cognitive reasoning, scientific inventiveness, and the ability to push the boundaries of our physical and emotional strength.

The Israelites were exhausted one year out, but also recharged and renewed. Looking back, they must have been terribly embarrassed at their shortcomings. They must have assumed they had failed the test miserably, and that God and history would now choose someone else for the great experiment of Torah and sacred peoplehood.

They were right, but also wrong. Indeed, they had failed, but in so doing they had, as it were, "invented" the Jewish notion of repentance, *teshuvah*. They had exemplified the possibility of taking stock, noting shortcomings, vowing to improve, and moving forward. Now, at the foot of the mountain where they had trembled in fear only months before, they stood before a fine communal structure – *their own cooperative handiwork!* - and in the presence of God's loving holiness.

We will soon do the same. We will count our losses, but also recount our gains. We will review what we have learned about ourselves. We will record it in our Torah for future reference and study. We will slowly but surely come back together. We will sing – at first softly, but then in great waves of sound. We will compose our own "Song of the Sea." And we will sing it henceforth, and God willing, we will teach it to generations yet to come.