

Beshalach

Our world is going through a major change. We are exiting the Industrial Age moving into the new era of the Information Age. We are moving from an age where many people worked in factories and well-defined 9 to 5 jobs. We are moving to an age where robots are better able to do many jobs people do and where more and more people work independently. We are moving into a global economy. We are moving into a world where communicating with people half way around the world is often easier than communicating with ones next door neighbor.

This week's Torah portion continues the Exodus story describing the long journey through the desert from slavery in the land of Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. It describes how many of the people yearned to go back. Many pleaded their desire to return to a place they knew rather than a place unknown.

There are many similarities with today's environment. In the last U.S. Presidential Campaign, a majority of voters on both sides voiced a strong desire for change. Voters made it very clear that being in the desert is difficult. Things needed to be changed. Unfortunately, both sides promoted their desire to go back instead of forward. Both sides advocated bringing factory work back. Both sides advocated solidifying old laws, processes and procedures that may not be applicable in the new era.

February is Jewish Disability Awareness Month. People with disabilities are also wandering the desert, exiting one era but not quite ready to enter the new era. In the old era much progress was made. Wonderful laws, such as the Americans with Disability Act, helped make the physical environment much more accessible. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act helped guarantee that children with disabilities in the U.S. get an appropriate education. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, that now has more than 160 signatories globally, is helping people with disabilities throughout the world engage with their communities. Yet in many ways people with disabilities are slaves to their disability and to antiquated laws designed to take care of them. The unemployment rate of people with disabilities in U.S. remains over 75% - the same as it had been in the 1950's when I grew up and before any of the laws mentioned above were passed. Federal law still requires people with disabilities to prove they cannot work in order to receive services needed for survival.

Today, programs such as Supplemental Security Income (S S I) are viewed primarily as safety nets. They protect people who supposedly are unable to work. In the new era, these programs will hopefully change to provide services enabling people to optimize their abilities. Today, we may encourage people with disabilities to do their best. In the new era, everyone will be expected to fully live their lives. The tools and services required to function optimally will be available to everyone. Today, medical equipment, personal assistant services, and other human support services are viewed as services that help for people with disabilities. In the new era, they will be viewed as enablers available to all people. Disability will be viewed as a diversity asset rather than a health issue. Personal assistants will be viewed as a good job and may be a very big job market. Special education will be the norm available to all children enabling them to reach their potential.

Neither personal nor societal transitions are ever easy. 5 years ago I went through a personal transition. I went from being a very independent person with a disability to a person who needs personal assistant services for almost all my activities of daily living. I used to be able to get out of bed whenever I wanted, eat when I wanted, drive a car when I wanted and do almost everything without assistance. Now I rely on attendants. I prided myself for knowing how to be a person with a disability. I was shocked at how difficult the transition was and continues to be. I was amazed at how difficult it was to rely on people for my everyday needs. I too yearned to go back. There is, however, no turning back. For me, my transitioning reinforced my understanding of how truly wonderful people are. People do amazing things when asked. I learned to ask for what I need. I also learned to value time and focus

on things that are most important to me. Yes, transitions are difficult. They cannot be avoided.

In this weeks Torah portion we read about how many Egyptian soldiers tried to pull the Jews back and how many Jews wanted to go back. We see that today. Many people want to go back and many people are trying to pull us back. What I find most exciting about Bashalach is that the Jews did not turn back. The Egyptian soldiers weren't able to bring us back. Similarly today, there can be no going back. Wandering the desert is, and will continue to be, difficult. We will get to our destination! It took the Jews 40 years to cross the desert. No one knows how long it will take us to cross our desert. There is one thing we do know. We must Go! Go! Go!