

Torah from around the world #200

We All Stand Together // Parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)

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As we approach the turning of the secular calendar, I often think back over events in my life. Prompted by this week's parasha, Bo, certain moments come into clear focus.

In 1998, while skiing with my family, I decided to take a run on my own. In those days, I was a bit of a "hot-dogger" - youth and over-confidence in one's ability combined to lead to a bit of recklessness. Needing to be humbled, I found myself in mid-air during a jump, only to discover that there was no more snow under me - just mud and rocks. A long and graphic story can be reduced to this: I needed my left knee reconstructed in surgery, and as I was wheeled in, my surgeon promised me that next season, I would be back on the slopes - albeit skiing more carefully.

During those intervening months of my rehabilitation, one of my dearest friends and colleagues was diagnosed with advanced stage cancer. One of the few things that got her through the debilitating treatments was our promise to each other that we would ski together the following season in Aspen.

So around this very time of year, at the beginning of 1999, we headed out to Aspen, Colorado with a plan - we would use one another - depend upon one another. Both accomplished skiers, we deigned to take a lesson together to make sure that we were skiing properly, and then off we went for five days of wonderful skiing - cautious and tentative - but fun nonetheless.

How much we need one another in difficult times - we discussed this between runs and on the chairlift. The day we took our lesson together, my friend and I learned something very special about the place we skied. The town of Aspen was named for the Aspen tree - an indigenous tree which has very unique characteristics. The Aspen tree is never found alone - it is only found in groups. If one were to dig down in the soil, one would discover that all the roots of these trees are intertwined; that is the only way that the trees can survive the difficult environment of rocky, mountainous soil in high altitudes.

Moshe rabbaynu - Moses, our teacher - reminds us in this week's Torah portion that our community is very much like the Aspen trees. After a number of plagues, Pharaoh seems ready to relent and asks Moses how many Israelites need to go to worship God. Moses replies: "We will all go, our young and our old, our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds, for we must all observe God's festival" (Exodus 10:9). Pharaoh replies that only the men would be able to go and Moses holds out. After the final plague befalls Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Pharaoh called out, "Up, depart from

among my people, you and the Israelites with you! Go, worship the Eternal as you said! Take also your flocks and your herds, as you said, and begone! And may you bring a blessing upon me also!” (Exodus 12:31-32).

As we enter this secular New Year, we would do well to be reminded about how much we need each other - how important it is to stand together, and how much a community depends upon each and every member of that community.

Albert Einstein, who was often happiest when alone, once wrote:

Strange is our situation here upon earth.

Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose.

From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we know: that we are here for the sake of others;

above all, for those on whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends; and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy.

Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of others, both living and dead,

and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.

As I am often called upon to teach communities around North America about the remarkable work of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, Talmud Bavli's admonition (Shevuot 39a) serves as a theme, “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh” (All Israel is responsible one for another). On the top of a mountain, fifteen years ago, there was no more truth in the world, as two friends, battling their own unique pains, turned downhill and enjoyed the glories of God's creation - depending on one another.

A Postscript: this “Torah From Around the World” is dedicated to the memory of my beloved friend and teacher, Rabbi Julie Ringold Spitzer z”l. Julie passed away ten months after that ski trip - but her contributions to the Reform Jewish community, as a leader in the North American community and especially her ground-breaking work in domestic violence within our own community, continues to save lives and elevates our work. The memory of the righteous is, indeed, a blessing.

And may we all have a wonderful secular New Year of 2014 - Happy Sylvester!