



Parashat Beshalach 5779 January 19, 2019 - 13th Sh'vat, 5779

This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging.

Dear FJMC family,

This past Shabbat, we lost one of our brothers, Steve Krodman a"h, and I am dedicating this edition of The Unraveller to his blessed memory. Before I explain how the commentary below relates to one of his greatest character strengths, I want to share some of his leadership history with the FJMC so that folks who didn't know - or perhaps only met him more recently, like me – can appreciate how much he exemplifies the kind of leader that the FJMC seeks to cultivate.

Among his many prominent roles, Steve served as president of Etz Chaim Men's Club in Marietta, Georgia; as Regional President for Anshei Darom; as Chair of the World Wide Wrap in 2011; and finally as Co-Chair of our 2019 Convention, at which we will honor his memory and provide a fuller account of the myriad ways he contributed to the FJMC at the local, regional and international levels.

I spoke at Steve's funeral about how he demonstrated tremendous positivity through much of the seven months between getting his ALS diagnosis and succumbing to the highly-aggressive form of this disease that he contracted. Notwithstanding the physical challenges that worsened each week, Steve did his best to maintain good cheer and to express gratitude for the love and care he received from friends and family. Always known for his quick wit, Steve was as funny and playful as ever in his last phone conversation with our international president, Stan Greenspan, and me.

While it's inaccurate to say that Steve's terminal illness made him a more optimistic person, he definitely gave voice to little pessimism about his condition, no matter how frequently demoralizing it could be. The midrash cited in my commentary below (published in 2012 by the Jewish Theological Seminary) imagines the opposite kind of character in Pharaoh, who exemplifies the negativity of a complete misanthrope in the mind of our Ancient Sages. His advisers serve as a foil, describing how his disregard for the literal and figurative wealth of the Israelites ultimately made him regret not valuing them until they had departed Egypt. Let us follow Steve's example instead, cherishing the gift of each other's presence and the acts of lovingkindness that represent riches we neither earn nor truly repay.

May we learn from the life of Steve Krodman, Simcha Barukh ben Eliyahu, and make his memory a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director

Exodus Rabbah 20:2

כך היה פרעה כששלח את ישראל לא היו לפניו כלום אמרו לו גדולי מלכות מה עשית אילו לא היה בידם אלא הבזה לבדה דיים שנאמר (שמות יב) וגם ערב רב עלה אתם ולא עוד אלא שכמה עשירים היו בהם כמה חכמים וכמה בעלי אומניות שנאמר (שיר ד) שלחך פרדס רמונים כמה אנשים ונשים וטף היו שנאמר (ירמיה נ) וכל שוביהם החזיקו במה כתוב אחריו (שם) גואלם חזק ה' צבאות שמו באותה שעה התחיל קורא ווי ווי יהי בשלח

When Pharaoh let Israel go, they were worthless in his eyes. His regal advisers, however, said to him, "What have you done? If they had only departed with their plunder, it would have been enough [to mourn their loss], as it says: And a mixed multitude went up also with them... (Ex. 12:38). Add to this the number of rich people among them, the many wise people and skilled craftsmen, too... Consider the number of men, women, and children they include, as it says: All their captors held them... (Jer. 50:33) What does it say after this? Their Redeemer is mighty, His name is Lord of hosts; [He will champion their cause...](Jer. 50:34). It was then that Pharaoh began to wail: Vay, Vay!(Alas!). Hence, vayyehi b'shallah ("there was woe in letting the people go" – a rereading of Ex. 13:17).

Have we become like Pharaoh in the midrash above - both an oppressive captor and a powerless captive of his own psychological blindness? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel raised this question nearly fifty years ago in commenting upon the role of race and religion in the United States for citizens of all backgrounds. Today we must again ask a similar question of ourselves: have we despaired of the apparently waning worth of the Jewish people, emotionally letting go of our people's potential even as the next generation actually holds greater numbers, resources, and wisdom than our eyes alone perceive?

I ask these questions after learning of a new Brandeis University demographic study that upends previous statistical projections predicting a steady decline in the number of American Jews. Instead, this more sophisticated survey shows a significant rise in the American Jewish population of more than 1.3 million above the estimate from ten years ago. At twenty-percent growth, that is a huge increase! Obviously, information technology has vastly improved beyond that available to the National Jewish Population Study (NJPS) in 1990 and 2000. Nonetheless, even then critics of the NJPS and its interpretation expressed concern that the study's data and analysis did not account for the whole story of American Judaism. In the words of my colleague and former classmate Rabbi Brent Spodek, we had "confused the observable with the significant" and allowed our fears of demise triumph over our ideals and dreams for the future.

While worries about intermarriage and assimilation justly remain, we must use this new evidence to halt the siege mentality that has produced a protective paralysis. This reactionary culture has kept many Jews from adequately appreciating and financially supporting the progressive and creative expressions of American Jewish life that have become the hallmark of my generation. Indeed, another recent study, by JTS Professor Jack Wertheimer, articulates how those values give young Jews so much Jewish pride.

We now have the opportunity to play the role of Pharaoh's advisors in this midrash. Like them, let us call attention to the "rich people...the many wise people and skilled craftsmen, too"—those who populate our midst and might champion God's cause of social and spiritual transformation in the coming decades.