

## D'VAR TORAH: B'MIDBAR 12:55

Today's parsha, B'Midbar, is the first chapter of the Book of Numbers. B'Midbar refers to the forty years between the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt and their arrival in the Promised Land. Today is also the day that our synagogue community has the opportunity to welcome Mateso Kagenyekero, Asani Furaha, and Divin Heri, a Congolese family who also fled their home to find freedom. Like the Jews in Egypt, it took many years for the family to reach their destination. As I read the parsha and various commentaries, I couldn't help but think about its meaning in the context of the journeys of millions of modern day refugees, wandering in their own physical and psychic wilderness, in search of a promised land.

The Jewish escape from Egypt was a communal one. The fact that this collection of clans was able to remain together for 40 years is nothing short of miraculous. God's rigid ordering of Jews by clan, with tasks assigned based on clan

membership, while it can be likened to a caste system, also helped create a strong community, bound by a shared purpose of guarding the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a physical reminder of the communal belief in an ever-present God who led them out of Egypt. This shared belief fueled the forty year journey of two generations. This sense of shared purpose was an essential ingredient that enabled the Jews to remain connected in spite of challenges from the outside as well as within.

Unlike our ancient ancestors, Mateso, Asani, and Divin were not accompanied by a community of friends, family, and neighbors. Their escape from violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo to their current home in Northampton was a sixteen year journey, that first took them to Burundi, where they lived as second class citizens until their persecution became intolerable. The day the family arrived at Bradley Airport, Mateso shared with our circle the trepidation the family felt during their five-flight journey

from Burundi to Bradley. They were traveling in an airplane for the first time, destined for a foreign country on the other side of the world, unsure if anyone would be there when they arrived to help them navigate this new wilderness.

All of their belongings were contained in just a few suitcases of varying sizes, which our circle of care loaded into the van that would bring them to their temporary house in Laurel Park. When we tell the story of the exodus, we focus on the escape from the cruel conditions of slavery in Egypt. Yet, the Jews were not always slaves. Jacob's sons migrated to Egypt, riding on the coattails of Joseph, who had won Pharaoh's favor. Their children and generations to follow successfully integrated into Egyptian life, prospering and multiplying. Egypt was home, until a new Pharaoh came to power. Threatened by the success of the Israelites, the new pharaoh used the politics of fear to turn the

Egyptians against the Israelites, justifying their enslavement.

Like the Jewish refugees who escaped from Egypt, today's refugees have had to leave the places that once were home in order to escape life-threatening persecution. Yet, the relief of freedom does not cancel out the anguish of leaving behind the familiarity of home and community. U.N.

Ambassador Nikki Haley recently justified the fact that the U.S. has only admitted eleven Syrian refugees so far this year, by stating that, "Not one of the many that I talked to ever said we want to go to America." Our U.N. Ambassador clearly did not understand the pain of choosing to leave one's home, and all that entails, in order to stay alive. It was not surprising that some of the disgruntled in the Sinai would have preferred to return to the familiarity of Egypt.

Mateso, Asani, and Divin refer to the members of their circle as their new family, but we are not so foolish as to

assume that they came here with a blank slate. One of the first times I visited the family, Divin and I looked through some albums of family photos: cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles. Those who were left behind. These photos were holy. They connected this young boy to his past, and would help the family maintain a sense of identity, even though they were now planting seeds in a new land.

Hirsch's commentary on Pg. 785 of our Tanach expresses his concern that the Kohathites, who were charged with moving the sacred objects of the Tent of Meeting from place to place while the Jews were in Sinai, "might become too accustomed to the routine of seeing the sacred objects packed and unpacked, losing their capacity to see the tabernacle as holy." Sadly, what is sacred, whether tangible or intangible, often gets lost amid the challenges of moving from the wilderness to resettlement in another land.

So often, those of us with good intentions who work with refugees are so focused on helping them to become American, that we forget to recognize what is sacred to them. As a child, Divin will likely learn English and become Americanized quickly. How can we as a community help this and other refugee families successfully resettle, while nourishing the elements of their culture that are sacred?

God's seemingly rigid organization of the twelve tribes was designed to keep what is holy alive beyond the generation of Sinai. It's why we are here as Jews today. The Congolese refugees that have come to Northampton, as well as millions of other refugees in many parts of the world, have spent years in the wilderness of refugee camps, in alien countries, wandering from place to place in search of refuge. Such conditions threaten to destroy ethnic and religious identities. The psychological price of losing one's identity is a heavy one. Jews have endured the refugee experience in many generations. While we are implored by our history

to welcome the stranger, we must also let the stranger welcome us into their world.

The Levites, the children of Levi, Jacob's last son to die, were spared the oppression of the rest of the Israelites in Egypt. While the rest of the Israelites assimilated into Egyptian culture, the Levites stood apart, as spiritual teachers and leaders. Their determination to resist assimilation enabled them to escape slavery. In Sinai, they were the primary guardians of the Tabernacle.

By the end of May, five Congolese families will be resettling in Northampton. We can assist in helping our Congolese neighbors in many ways: teaching them English, helping them find jobs, donating funds, taking them grocery shopping. But let's not make them into us. Instead, let us work with them to create opportunities for their history and traditions to enrich our Northampton community.

The Levites, who remained true to themselves, even in Egypt, are a reminder of the importance of not losing sight of one's identity and what is meaningful. I have come to believe this is central to how we support Asani, Mateso, and Divin. We are not charged with making those who resettle in our community into versions of our own friends and neighbors.

The Torah doesn't talk about how trauma figures into the story of the Israelites. It's reasonable to assume that many of our ancestors who escaped Egypt suffered the effects of psychic trauma. I like to think that God's creation of an organized community in the wilderness helped mitigate the traumatic effects of years of slavery. Organized systems of Jewish community: havurahs, synagogues, Jewish groups continue to provide sustenance, familiarity, connection, and healing today. Just as God surrounded the Levites with clans who encircled and supported them, to help preserve what is holy, we too must attend to finding ways for our



Congolese neighbors to retain their cultural identity as a source of strength and connection, regardless of where they live.

May the source of life protect those who flee violence, and give them patience and courage to find a place for themselves in new lands. And may we all be guided by the blessed memories of those who came before us.