

“What do we bring with us where we’re going?”

I had a visitor this week. She’s an old friend who grew up in Houston and at Beth Israel. She lives outside the city now. She’s doing well, and in large part because she’s lending her experiences to others who need her help. She said that she’s giving them advice I once gave her. Some time ago, when her aging parents were failing to thrive at home under their own care, she struggled to help them regularly. She knew that in her heart-of-hearts that they needed to be in an assisted-living center, but she couldn’t bring herself to broach the subject with them. That’s when I interjected.

To my friend, I said, “There’s no one who will replace your love for your parents. There’s no one they’ll adore more than you. But, you’re not a skilled nurse, you’re not a cook and housekeeper, and you’re not physically able to lift them if, God forbid, they should fall. Either they need to have regular help at home or they need to live somewhere they’ll be safe.”

It took many tries to convey the message without losing their trust and certain affection. But, eventually, she prevailed. The result is that she has been able to visit them regularly and without any concern except to bring them something they need from the store, and to spend precious time with them. In fact, when she sets a time for a visit with them, they often use it as reason to prepare, to look forward to her visit, and to brag to their friends that she’s coming...again.

After a lifetime of familiar routines and total independence, it’s almost unimaginable to surrender it all. But, when we look into Jewish history, we find the advice that we need. We learn that when we reach boundaries, beyond which everything is different, there are blessings to be found there, too.

In this week’s Torah portion, Moses tells the Israelites about their obligations when they enter the Promised Land. In effect, he says to them, up until now it’s all been theoretical; it’s all been preparation for this time. When you cross over the Jordan into the Land of Canaan, all that you’ve prepared to do will become an obligation upon you. Over there, you’ll be held to account for all the God commanded you to do. In exchange for gratitude and gifts of thanks, God will bless you and comfort you.

Moses reminded them that, throughout their wilderness journey, they were never without what they needed. The clothes did not wear out on their back, their food supply sustained them, and God’s presence guided them. As they entered an unfamiliar land, they were told to take possession of it. They were told to tear down idols and pillars to false gods. They were told to make it their very own.

We're reaching new boundaries, too. And, though our boundaries are not exactly like our ancestors', there are similarities that shouldn't be overlooked.

To begin, though Moses wasn't at the helm, faith accompanied the Israelites into a land they didn't know. Each step they took in the right direction was accompanied by God's blessing. They thrived there. Likewise, faith accompanies us, too, when we go beyond familiar boundaries to enter a home we've never known. The change can be disorienting, but faith is filled with promise and it can sustain us again, even now.

A member of our congregation tells me that he has a prayer routine that has accompanied him all his life. Wherever home has been, his morning begins with a familiar prayer that includes the words, "O God, the soul You have given me is a pure one! You created it and formed it, and breathed it into me, and within me you sustain it. So long as I have breath, therefore, I will give thanks to You, O God."

But, there's another person I've come to know who has no prayer routine. Even so, his Judaism is important to him. When he was convalescing at home and aware of his increasing physical limitations, he said to me that it's important to choose life, as Torah taught him to do. He put it this way, "You live for the living." Affection from family and friends who still visited gave him reasons to believe deep in his soul that his life had purpose.

Second, the Israelites aimed to live as they had never lived before now. Though they were Hebrews --- by definition they were those who crossed over --- they were destined to become settlers in their own land for the first time. In the course of our lifetime, we've known the Hebrew life, too. From our parents' house we were driven off to college in the dorm or fraternity or sorority; then we were driven to an apartment we shared with friends; then we were driven to the starter home we made with our spouse and then to the home we came to know with our family; and, then we downsized to a townhome or hi-rise. My goodness; we've been driven out our whole life. We're Hebrews, after all, who are constantly on the move until we reach a time and an age when we're settled. A final home, yes, but one in which feeling settled, quieted, and at rest is welcome. It can be a gift.

Finally, though Moses didn't enter the Promised Land, his faith and his inspiration went with the Israelites. In honor of his faithfulness, the Torah finishes with a remarkable tribute to Moses. In Deuteronomy 34, we read, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses." His good name endured.

Boundaries, therefore, are not the end; they're almost always a new beginning, too. We just have to decide what matters most. Is it a house we cling to long after we should? Billy Crystal, in his book "700 Sundays," writes that in his memories he can go back to his childhood home anytime he wants, even though his family left it decades ago.

Is what matters most that we should hope to live forever despite natural laws of entropy? We all know the saying, "You can't take it with you," and "No one gets out of this world alive."

Or, is what matters most all the stuff we've collected over the years that helps us cling to the past?

I saw an editorial cartoon that put it best. An elderly father holding onto his walker is standing next to his son. In front of them is a large storage unit stuffed to the gills with everything the old man saved over decades of collecting. Pointing at the overloaded storage unit bursting with unorganized stuff, the father said to his son, "One day, all this will be yours."

More than likely, what matters most will be found, as it often is, along the way. It's just as we've read in our prayer book, "We see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, but in having made the journey, stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage."

Tomorrow night, we formally enter the season of repentance with Selichot, a brief, late-night service of penitential prayers. It's our first approach to the boundary of the New Year. We'll begin to assess and account. We'll begin to ask what we'll take with us into the New Year? Where will we be, how will we live, and when will we feel settled, at home, where we are?

I'd like to hope that the greatest quality that we can bring into the New Year with us is not the stuff or collected items we hope will endure well beyond our days; but, rather the deeds we've done that will leave an indelible impression on the lives of those we've touched. I'd like to hope that the greatest and most enduring part of us will be the good name we've made and bequeathed to those who will one day speak well of us. Rabbi Jacob Rudin taught, "Let it not be said that life was good to us, but, rather, we were good to life."

Amen.