

D'var Torah: Will Belvin, Meg Marion, and Andrea Neloms Shelach L'cha

Meg: We're just a few days into Pride month, an immensely appropriate time to celebrate all manner of diversity within our congregation. [You know, those who prefer Friday night's services to Saturday morning's.] Similarly, society is undergoing massive reclamation, leading us to think more deeply about who we are and what we can do to repair our fragile world. We've literally been separated by physical distance for the past year and change so, as we finally gather in person, let's make sure that our temple is truly 'for all who enter...the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.'

To that end, this week's Torah portion Shelach L'cha is Torah gold, describing what happens when 12 eminent scouts are sent to survey the Promised Land and report what they find there. In like manner, my co-leaders not only have unique perspectives on what they found when they joined our temple ranks, but a shared backstory in having converted in pandemic-colored 2020 with Lake Hamilton as their Mikvah and Laurie Arnold's Hot Springs condo as their socially distanced sanctuary. [A quick note about Laurie: When she sadly realized that not being able to drive after foot surgery would keep her

from being here, she recruited Will, then I recruited Laurie to co-lead Torah study with me tomorrow morning. Everybody wins.] Anyhow, as Andrea and Will swapped stories, two themes emerged, brought to you Sesame Street style by the letter R: Reconnaissance, and Repair.

Will, a Sergeant in the National Guard , will brief us on both.

Will: My Jewish reconnaissance mission began as most do: at my church, St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, where I felt spiritually unfulfilled. Interestingly, the rector repeatedly referenced Jewish theology and thought, so I began to research Judaism, reading books about theology, morality, and ethics. What resonated for me were Tikkun Olam and action, two beliefs central to Judaism and already deeply ingrained in me. As Jews we are called to repair the world and we do this through mitzvot and living moral and ethical lives. Unlike the ten spies who only passively viewed the promised land and were afraid of the difficulty in claiming it as their own, we are called to be like Jacob and Caleb, to embrace the difficulties and challenges and stand and fight for good, right, and justice for ourselves and all people. In short, Judaism is an active faith and, in my reconnaissance, Jews

take this seriously and live it rather than just give lip service to it one day a week.

Meg: Thank you, Will. Andrea's reconnaissance was more inward looking and ties into a different sort of repair.

Andrea: I have always been a private person, filled with pain, a rape survivor, a victim of domestic violence. I was seeking the place that G-D was leading me to, a place that would accept me with all of my faults. A community not built upon social class, education, or popularity. I do not have the best relationship with my parents; my mother tells me she hates me most days — I'm not her favorite child. That I haven't accomplished anything in my life. I have multiple degrees; and I push my children to accomplish more than I have. I know my worth. Words used to bother me, but I am on a journey of faith which has led me to Congregation B'nai Israel.

Meg: Thank you for your honesty, Andrea. Will, please take us into the second wave of your recon process.

Will: I continued my spy mission by looking into how Jews treat the LGBT community. As a gay man, I knew what discrimination and rejection look like because I had experienced this throughout most of

my Christian life. What I found was a community dedicated to not treating me as separate but equal, but as a full and completely equal member of the community. Not only was Judaism welcoming to LGBT people in their own communities, but they actively fight for equality and fair treatment for LGBT and all minority people in the broader community and the world. I discovered a people who have known discrimination, rejection, and persecution and actively fight, educate, and strive so that no one else has to endure such hardships.

Meg: That was beautifully put and it seems the right time to mention that our annual Pride Shabbat is June 18th. Like the spies' reports, your thoughts about of your first encounters with the temple diverge. Andrea, what did you experience?

Andrea: I still remember the evening of my first Judaism 101 class, I was so nervous. I was a black female, with tattoos, a big personality, an outsider. I was judged purely on looks. That was a form of prejudice. I had to work harder than anyone to earn the members respect, that is how I felt. Rabbi wasn't unkind but he doesn't tolerate fools. You are not just going to walk in and join this community, you have to study, participate, and work hard. I believe everyone displays apprehension, but that turns into love once people get to know you. Our religion is

precious, and you want to protect it and make sure that it is going to be loved and respected by whoever joins the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah.

Meg: Andrea, thank you for that helpful perspective. Will, how apprehensive were you?

Will: After my initial reconnaissance, I knew I had found my spiritual home and the place I was meant to be. But now I had to do some more in-depth reconnaissance. I had to actually go see the Jewish community and see if I would truly fit in and how to start the journey to conversion. I am naturally a very shy and introverted person so working up the courage to register for Judaism 101 and attend the course was very difficult. What I found when I went to the Temple made me realize how irrational my fears were. I found a community that was warm and welcoming. I cannot count the number of people who greeted me like they had known me my entire life. I was immediately surrounded by supportive and loving people. I also made some lifelong friends in the course that have become my own little Jewish family. The support and love has only intensified since completing my conversion, and I can only say to other people out there who are conducting their own reconnaissance of Judaism, be like Jacob and Caleb, boldly go into the promised land and you will

be met with love, understanding and support and finally come home to where you belong.

Meg: Will, welcome to the marketing department. Seriously, one can only hope we're doing so well. Andrea, you get the last word tonight because I suspect that we all have work to do.

Andrea: There are still times that I feel that I am not accepted as an African American Jewish woman in the world. I have to argue about my religion and not “really” being accepted because I’m Black. I have been told, “You know you are just a token for them to say they have a Black member”. I could write a book on the opinions. But, to tell you the truth, I will always side with my religion and I’ve cut ties with many people because of that choice. I have faith in God, who has guided me through some very dark days, why would I deny God now?

When I became Jewish, I promised to never deny who I was, and my religion defines me. I will not feel ashamed of my Jewishness or leave the path that the Eternal one has set me forth on. I have found a community of abundance, a family, and friends that I trust and love at Congregation B’nai Israel. I pray that feelings of love, kindness, and acceptance are returned.

Meg: I can't thank you both enough for allowing us a glimpse into each of your lives. Shabbat Shalom.