

## Our President, Amanda Orgel: A Lesson in Allyship

### *Shabbat Naso 5782*

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The finale of this week’s Torah portion, Numbers chapter 7, includes 88 verses—on the surface, at least, as tedious as it is long. It begins: “On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the alter and its utensils. [Then], the chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses...drew near and brought their offering before the Eternal.”<sup>i</sup> The boring part follows, as we read the names of all those tribal leaders and the gifts they brought; eleven days for eleven tribes.

But wait. Aren’t there twelve tribes? Yes. Only eleven bring gifts because God commands that the Levites, the priests and their cousins who served as their attendants, bring none. Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Imani Chapman and Rabbi Ellen Lippmann teach us that Aaron, the high priest, “has been in despair at seeing his tribe of Levi not included in those rituals.” As a result, next week’s portion begins with God commanding Moses to have Aaron lift the lights of the *menorah*. The Levites do not bring covered wagons or the animals to draw them. Their gift is light.<sup>ii</sup>

For many years now, and particularly these last two years as president, Amanda Orgel has shed light on our congregation as a leader with wisdom, decisiveness, prompt and clear communication, kindness, and enthusiasm.

Every day of Amanda’s presidency overlapped an ongoing global pandemic. We have constantly had to pivot. The need to change course is nothing new for our people. Throughout our history, circumstances have confronted Jewish communities or the wider society in which they lived, forcing adaptations, often creative ones.

That process begins in the Bible, in the wilderness. Because of a defilement that prohibits them to engage in sacred rituals, some of the Israelites are unable to observe Passover on the proper date. In effect, they are both required and forbidden to offer a Paschal sacrifice that day. Moses seeks God’s guidance; and God enables those Israelites, under specific limited circumstances, to celebrate Passover a month late. As Chapman and Lippman explain, “God grants us not only the specific opportunity [to make up for the missed Passover], but also the broader possibility of second chances.”<sup>iii</sup>

Amanda is not God, I am not Moses, and Eileen is not Miriam. Still, for two years, with expert guidance from our Covid Task Force and through creative

problem-solving with our Executive Committee and Board, Amanda has empowered Eileen, other members of our staff, our fantastic volunteers and me to think expansively, to prepare programs and services in ways we never had previously, to engage our congregation in new ways, and not to burn ourselves out in the process. And if we got it wrong the first time, a second chance was always available.

In short, Amanda has been an extraordinary ally to Eileen and to me, and to all of our staff, volunteers, and lay leadership. Our governing documents designate the President as the congregation's Chief Executive Officer. Amanda has been unafraid to take up that mantle when the situation called for that. More often, she has encouraged others, beginning with Eileen and me, to be our best selves and to do what's best for the congregation we all love.

Chapman and Lippmann describe several attributes required of an ally:

**Awareness.** You recall that the tabernacle does not benefit from **all** the Israelites until the Levites are privileged to lift its lights. Chapman and Lippmann teach that the preeminent medieval commentator “Rashi suggests that the lifting of the lights...is actually the lifting of the priest doing the lighting and that the priest stood on some kind of stool or small ladder to lift the lights to their proper place.” We are obliged to pay attention to what's needed and provide it to those in need.<sup>iv</sup>

One of the great moments of Amanda's presidency came last summer, when she realized—that is, she became **aware**—that our staff had taken too little time off during the pandemic. Often, a chief executive's job is to make people work harder. On that occasion, though, Amanda recognized that people needed a break. She closed the office for the week. She even wrote an article about it, and it was published by our Union for Reform Judaism. Interestingly, the Union itself had done something similar for its staff, but its leaders kept that quiet, not wanting people to think they were slacking. By contrast, Amanda wanted everybody to know—that is, to be **aware**—that vacations are critical to productivity. She encouraged other congregations to follow our example. Colleagues thanked me when their lay leaders heeded Amanda's suggestion. The thanks, I told them, was due to Amanda.

**Listening.** I once knew a real estate agent whose motto was, “I can sell any house except my own.” As any Facebook friend of hers knows, Amanda Orgel can keep anybody's secret except her own. Amanda is humble enough not only to know but to broadcast her weaknesses. As she began her presidency, she knew that she was too quick to react—specifically, to speak before others were done. The ability to mute herself on Zoom became her friend. She used it even more on

herself than she did on others when she was running a worship livestream. She learned to listen before reacting.

**Learning.** Chapman and Lippmann write, “While we can never be fully competent in the culture of another, ...we can continue to learn and be curious, recognizing that [others may be] the experts.”<sup>v</sup> Amanda learned a great deal as our President—about Judaism, about specific technologies we employ, and above all, about the diverse needs of our congregation. Amanda consistently asked us to take **all** of our congregants into account. No, we couldn’t make **everybody** happy with each decision we made, particularly about Covid safety. At the same time, knowing where everybody is coming from has been central to our making the best decisions collectively.

**Persisting.** Chapman and Lippmann remind us “that *cheit*, which is often translated as ‘sin,’ is a term borrowed from archery, meaning ‘to miss the mark.’ We do not give up when we miss the mark. Rather, we try again.”<sup>vi</sup> Persistence is a quality that Amanda brought to her role as president. She works hard, learns what she needs to know, and carries out her mission. I suspect that has something to do with why she recently earned that terrific promotion at the Library. Her determination to achieve what's best for Congregation B'nai Israel has benefitted our synagogue home and all of its members.

Now, having earned the presidency of our congregation through her long years of service that gained the trust of our membership, Amanda has even more richly earned the most distinguished title a synagogue can bestow: Past President. Not to mention mother of one of our fabulous Temple musicians!

Every rabbi, every Temple staff, and every member of a synagogue anywhere, would be blessed to have an ally like Amanda Orgel. We are blessed that she is ours.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Numbers 7:1-3.

<sup>iii</sup> Imani Romney-Rosa Chapman and Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, “Shedding Light on Solidarity: A Candle Loses Nothing by Lighting Another Candle,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 217.

<sup>iii</sup> Chapman and Lippmann, p. 216.

<sup>iv</sup> Chapman and Lippmann, pp. 217-218.

<sup>v</sup> Chapman and Lippmann, p. 219.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.