

What do we stand for?

This week we begin a whole new chapter in our family saga. To be more accurate, we begin Book Two in our five-book series, and this one is a real page-turner. Or should I say parchment roller. There is major change in the wind, foreshadowed by the ominous pronouncement, Exodus 1:8: "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." The text seems to imply that Pharaoh didn't know Joseph's *family*, who had lived and prospered in Egypt for generations. And it's just not that he didn't know them. This Pharaoh didn't *want* to know them.

There was no room for anyone else at the center of Pharaoh's universe, and no one who could stop him from destroying anyone whom he perceived as getting in his way — like the continually fruitful and ever-multiplying Israelites. So he enslaved them, and that enslavement lasted for the next 400 years.

And as if slavery wasn't enough, he ordered that, upon their birth, all Hebrew boys were to be drowned in the river Nile. Fortunately for Moses, his family defied that decree and sent him down the Nile in a basket instead, where he was intercepted by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as Egyptian royalty. But when he kills an Egyptian

taskmaster who was about to beat a Hebrew slave, he runs off to Midian, meets his future wife Tziporah and her family; takes up a new profession, shepherd; and makes God's acquaintance via a burning bush.

God then gives Moses a job promotion shepherding a different kind of flock — the Hebrew nation — and tasks him with the responsibility of leading the people out of slavery to freedom. And the rest, they say, is our history.

Moses is less than enthusiastic when it came to accepting his new position. He doesn't accept right away. But despite all of Moses' questions and doubts, God will simply not take "no" for an answer. And with the assurance that Aaron will be his voice, Moses, undoubtedly with trepidation, tells his wife to start packing. They're heading back to Egypt.

Although we can't possibly imagine what it would be like to take on the enormity of Moses' task, I'm sure most, if not all, of us know what it's like to jump into something that we feel clearly unprepared for. As it turned out, Moses was the right person for the job. Although not perfect,



D'VAR TORAH

By Cantor Sheri Allen

Parashat Shemot

he displayed the most important skills needed to be a truly successful leader: humility, respect, self-awareness, the ability to truly listen, the courage to take responsibility for one's mistakes as well as one's successes and the desire to learn from others.

And cultivating these leadership skills is no easy task. I've come to learn that one of my most sacred tasks on the bimah is to not just raise my voice in prayer, but to raise my voice in protest, to call attention to things that I believe should truly matter to all of us, whether it's issues of equality, human rights, civility, dignity or social justice. As Jews, we are not only supposed to be a light to the nations; we are also supposed to shine that light on the indignities, inhumanity and unrighteousness that we witness in the world. We come to synagogue to be rejuvenated, inspired and enlightened, but I believe that there are times when we should also leave feeling uncomfortable and motivated to take action — because our tradition teaches us that standing idly by is not acceptable.

As Rabbi Rachel Barenblat so beautifully expresses, "All of us are tasked with

perfecting our broken world — all of us are tasked with speaking truth to power, fighting for freedom, helping the vulnerable push through the narrow place of constriction into liberation. All of us are charged with cultivating the sense of wonder that will let us hear God's voice issuing forth from the fire, and the sense of obligation that binds us to the work we're here to do. . . . When the work of change and transformation call, don't look around to see who else might pick up the slack. Say 'Here I am. Send me.'"

I believe that we need to be forthright and open about what we stand for as Jewish institutions and congregations. We need to define what it means to be "welcoming of all," and then to practice what that looks like. Our task is *tikkun olam* — repair of the world. But how can we repair the world if we don't acknowledge that it is broken? And there is much that has been broken over the last few years. We can't solve all the world's problems, but we can start right here, in our spiritual homes, and strive to become a voice for justice and fairness, for inclusivity and compassion.

Cantor Sheri Allen is the co-founder of Makom Shelanu, a new inclusive, affirming congregation in Fort Worth.

The Pope Benedict I knew

A keeper of his faith with a deep respect for Judaism

By Rabbi David Rosen

(JTA) — I was first introduced to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict XVI, in the late 1980s when he was visiting Jerusalem. Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, was eager for me to meet with the cardinal, telling me that I would discover a very different person from the image portrayed in the general media. He was so correct.

That image was in no small part the result of Pope John Paul II having made him the head of the Vatican Office for Doctrine and Faith, to enforce orthodox Catholic teaching. In addition, the fact that Ratzinger was a shy man with a professorial background and attitude often led people to see him as aloof and even cold.

He could not have been more different. I discovered a man of warmth and humor whose company was enjoyable and stimulating. Most significant for me was the discovery of the depth of his respect for Judaism and the Jewish people, something that always impressed me in the course of more than a dozen encounters with him when he was pope, most of which were in my capacity as the American Jewish Committee's in-

ternational director of interreligious affairs.

He always reiterated his commitment to continuing the path of his predecessor in advancing Catholic-Jewish relations, and he highlighted the unique relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

Benedict XVI, who died Dec. 31, 2022, at age 95, was the first pope to ever invite Jewish leaders both to the funeral of a pontiff and, above all, to the celebration of his own coronation, at which I was privileged to be one of those present.

Already during the first year of his pontificate he received many Jewish delegations and notable individuals, including the chief rabbis of Israel and the chief rabbi of Rome. In receiving the latter, he declared, "the Catholic Church is close and is a friend to you. Yes, we love you and we cannot but love you, because of the Fathers: through them you are very dear and beloved brothers to us."

The last time I met him personally was well after he had demonstrated his genuine and impressive humility in stepping down as pontiff and devoting himself to study and prayer. I visited him at the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in the Vatican gardens. While he was physically weak, his mind was still lucid.

We spoke in particular about the positive treatment of the Jewish scriptures in the work of the Pontifical Theological Commission that dealt with this subject, and which was published under his imprimatur. At that time, I recalled our first conversation in Jerusalem when he said to me, "Your duty as a believing Jew is to be true to Torah, and everything that is holy for you must have theological meaning for us."

I said to him, "You know there are many of us who see religious significance in the return of the Jewish people to its homeland."

"Of course, I know," he replied. "We must also view it as a sign of God's fidelity to His covenant with the Jewish people that has sustained you, even if we cannot attribute to it the same theological meaning as you might."

Cardinal Ratzinger was a member of the papal commission that ratified the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See, establishing full diplomatic relations between the two. It was my great privilege to have been part of the Israeli negotiating team that concluded that agreement.

One of Ratzinger's closest Israeli friends, the late professor Zvi Werblowsky of Hebrew University, told me that the cardinal phoned him



Photo: American Jewish Committee

Rabbi David Rosen, left, meets with Pope Benedict XVI, right, during the American Jewish Committee's leadership audience with the pope at the Vatican, March 2006. At center is E. Robert Goodkind, AJC president at the time.

from Rome to express his joy and congratulations on the agreement, declaring it to be a fulfillment of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council declaration of 1965 that revolutionized the Church's teaching and approach toward Jews and Judaism.

During Benedict's papacy a couple of serious crises in Jewish-Christian relations emerged relating to the Society of Saint Pius XII and to the wider provision of the Latin Mass and its text. These crises, as much a result of church governance mismanagement as anything else, were followed by clarifications that emphasized the Vatican's commitment to *Nostra Aetate*: its unqualified rejection of antisemitism as a sin against God and man, and a complete disavowal of proselytization of Jews.

Unfortunately, they still did not completely repair the damage to

Benedict XVI's papacy. Nevertheless, Benedict explicitly and sincerely strove to continue to advance the paths of his predecessor, especially regarding the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people.

In repeating his predecessor's dramatic gestures of going to the great synagogue in Rome; of paying homage in Auschwitz to the victims of the Holocaust; and of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he paid respects to the State of Israel's highest national civic and religious authorities, Pope Benedict institutionalized such steps, demonstrating the sincerity of Catholic-Jewish reconciliation for the Church as a whole.

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