



Cantor Dubrow's Message

January/February 2008

The Wandering/Wondering Jew

The first time I ever heard the phrase 'The Wandering Jew' was when I entered a flower shop in Park Slope, Brooklyn in the 1970s and the shopkeeper told me that the plant I was admiring was called a Wandering Jew. I immediately assumed it had been so named because its beautiful leaves – purple, green and silver - sprawled out in the pot in multiple directions, sort of like the Jewish Diaspora. I immediately identified with this Wandering Jew plant for I was a newlywed and had recently arrived in Brooklyn from four years of college in Philadelphia, and before that, growing up in the same home in New Jersey for eighteen years. So the Wandering Jew plant and I had something in common. I bought the plant. I watered it, gave it some sunlight, and before I knew it, more branches of the beautiful purple, silver and green leaves were spreading out, a sign of further wanderings in store for me.

Since those days in Brooklyn, my own wanderings have brought me to a professional life on the bimah at Congregation B'nai Jacob in Jersey City. Now that I've done some research recently, I have learned that the wandering Jew was a myth that took hold in the Middle Ages and became iconic in the subsequent centuries throughout all of Europe. It derived from lore regarding a Jew said to have been present at the Crucifixion of Jesus, who apparently urged Jesus to hurry up and was condemned by Jesus to wander the earth for eternity. There have been documented 'sightings' claimed over the centuries in various locations throughout Europe somewhat similar to the sightings of Elvis claimed in current times in the United States.

The figure of the Wandering Jew even fascinated writers and entered literature and appeared in many poems, novels, stories and plays on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including even a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The character became an emblem of the Jew damned to perdition through eternal wandering, a somewhat anti-Semitic reading, for sure. And by extension, the history of the Jews in the two millennia following Jesus and the birth of Christianity, certainly speaks to the wandering of Jews throughout countries and continents.

Jews have lived in most countries on the planet at one time or another, less by choice and more by circumstance – and that circumstance being one of non-acceptance by the resident culture. The Jew as 'other' has been all-pervasive in the history of modern Europe and we have indeed 'wandered' as a people. We must remember, of course, that our wandering goes back long before Jesus appeared on the horizon. We wandered in the desert for 40 years after we left Egypt, and before that, we wandered down to Egypt to escape famine. And before that, we wandered from Mesopotamia

to Canaan. So truly, the words 'Jew' and 'Wandering' are virtually synonymous.

Leaving is a form of letting go, so to an extent, the various wanderings the Jewish people have endured historically are markers of change. We have let go of one life, in order to embrace another, presumably better one. Of course, 70 C.E. was a watershed year, because once the temple was destroyed, leaving was not really a matter of choice, but necessity, survival. Still wherever Jewry propagated, it thrived and flourished.

The fact is that our 'Wandering' is what has made us strong as a people, with an ability to adapt to new circumstances and to embrace new cultures, even if out of necessity and the need to survive, but with a fervor of unparalleled strength that enable us to not just survive, but thrive as a people in a foreign land, wherever that land might be. Let us not think of our people as 'rootless', but rather 'rooted': rooted in the values, principles and precepts of our historical Jewish tradition. This is what helps us build strong trunks, limbs and leaves anywhere we go: the roots of *Eitz Chaim*.

And to that end, when we think of ourselves as part of a long tradition of the 'Wandering Jew', we can proudly identify ourselves, as well, with the long tradition of the 'Wondering Jew'. Has not 'Wondering', as well as 'Wandering' been part and parcel of the Jewish identity since the very beginning? Asking questions and, the natural result, seeking answers. We have been called the people of the book. We study, learn, seek and hopefully find. And new findings bring new questions. So along with the jargon of the 'Wandering Jew', I hope you'll embrace the notion of the 'Wondering Jew'. We may wander, but we also wonder, and with wonder comes inquiry, learning, wisdom and insight.

With the 'Wonder' of Hanukka and the Miracle of Lights behind us, we look forward now to the cold winter months of January and February. Mark your calendars for January 18th and **19th, Shabbat Shira, the Sabbath of Song**. The parasha for this Shabbat contains the *Shirat Ha'Yam* – the Song of the Sea – and we will have some special musical moments. On Friday evening, January 18th, we will have a special musical healing Shabbat with a few new melodies to soothe our spirits. On Saturday morning, January 19th, in *Shacharit* we will sing *Az Yashir Moshe* rather than our usual davening. For the Kiddish, since Tu Be'Shevat is the following week, we will have a mini-seder in honor of the *Chag*. Be sure to plan to come both for Friday night and Saturday morning services. Feel free to 'Wander' in at anytime and join our warm B'nai Jacob community!

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