

**Roots and Wings:
Inaugural Sermon
for Congregation Beth Israel**

**Parashat Korach
July 1, 2022**

Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

A deep and heartfelt thank you, this night, to the many people who helped bring us this wonderful congregation, and who are welcoming us to our new home here.

To the members of this congregation, and its friends: thank you for your interest, your involvement, and your sense of connection. I hope to earn a trusted place in your midst – if not in one single service, then over time.

To Linda Karp, in a return role as president, now managing a transition at a truly trying time, in the midst of an historic pandemic. To Shelly Meyers and the Search Committee, for all your hard work, and very obvious passion about this special place. And to a staff team I am very lucky to have and be working with – Susan Sokalsky, with magic dust and a way of making things happen... Cookie Feldman, as caring about the children of this congregation as anyone I have seen in that role... Linda Cohen, who promises to make sure I am in the right place and facing in the right direction. To Luke, who already saved me once by letting me in when I was stranded. And to Cantor Averbakh, whose conversations with me in

preparation for tonight reveal experience with and care for what will work, to lift us all to a higher place... and who seems blessedly able to work with a bimah partner who sings, well, as some of you have heard me say already, with far more enthusiasm than talent.

And, above all, the person from whom I first heard about this congregation, a cherished colleague and true friend, a blessing in my life and now my Emeritus, and yours, Rabbi David Weis, and Susan Weis. I will have slightly more to say about our relationship in a few moments; for now I just want to say, to convey, what an honor it is for me to serve as his successor and, to my colleague and friend, how glad I am that you and Susan are here tonight!

This night, as I stand here as your rabbi for the first time, an image leaps into my heart from a possibly less frequently told part of this week's portion. It was a time of unrest, and insurrection, civil strife a level the people could not recall having gone through before. There was rancor, and misinformation, competing claims to the mantle of leadership and confusion amongst masses of the people. The division grew so deep that, as the story is told, the ground beneath our feet was literally torn asunder, and those seen as opponents and enemies of all that was right and good and on the side of God were swallowed whole into the bowels of the earth.

On top of civil unrest, a plague, a pandemic broke out as well.

And then, and then... After the conflict with Korach the people were not sure they could ever come together again. And they *still* had questions about who would lead them.

And then Moses took a staff from each chieftain, each head of an ancestral house, twelve in all, and wrote Aaron's name on one staff. He brought them all into the *Ohel Mo'ed*, the Tent of the Pact.

And he watched. And he waited.

וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרַת וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֶהָל הָעֵדוּת וַהֲנִיחַ פָּרֹחַ מִטֵּה־אֶהָרֹן לְבַיִת לַיהוָה
וַיֵּצֵא פָּרֹחַ וַיִּצָּץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים :

The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds.

After showing the result to all the people, Moses then took the staff of Aaron, brought it back into the *Ohel Mo'ed*, and thrust it deep into the ground.

Deep in the ground, and filled with new blossoms and fruit.

To me, just as I come to New Jersey, a place filled with gardens and orchards and vegetables and fresh fruit, this echoes the image of the Tree of Life.

A congregation with a storied history enters a new season. Think about the term “living tradition.” It is, indeed, like a fruit-bearing tree. In order to blossom and bear fruit, it must have deep roots. But the fruit itself, the produce of each season, that is a response to the wind and water, the air and the atmosphere of that particular year.

A vibrant community. A living tradition. We thrive because we are able to take strength from the past, *and* respond to the present. Continuity. And change. Not either-or, but both, together.

But change, of course, can be hard. It brings with it many challenges.

A sticker, on a car, in the state of Florida, proudly proclaims: “We don’t care how you did it up north!”

My friends, I am fully aware that Rabbi Weis has been here for 33 years. To succeed – to successfully succeed – a long serving leader requires patience, good will and cooperation on the part of all parties involved. It requires that delicate dance between the old and the new, continuity and change, upon which the sweetness of the fruit of the season depends.

This is not an exact science. I may make changes by accident, even when attempting to do something in a way I thought was very familiar to you. I may intentionally do something I think is new, only to discover you have already been doing it for decades!

In a community with deep roots, where many families speak with pride about connections going back for generations, please remember the patience necessary to welcome someone new – whether it is me or any family moving here from “off shore.”

I recall asking for directions when just arriving at a previous congregation (and in the days before Waze and Google and other GPS systems). And the answer was: “Oh, you turn left just past where the old Boston Store was.” Folks – if I knew where the old Boston Store *was*... I might not have needed directions in the first place!

As I watched last Friday night’s service online, I was really moved by the warm words shared by Student Rabbi Alissa Platcow. She spoke about, and I have begun to experience, the welcome this community can give. She named this as a Jewish value, *hachnasat orchim*, the welcoming of newcomers.

I believe we cannot overstate how crucial this is. And, again, not just for me. Frankly, it is *more important* to greet a new face warmly than the risk of asking someone with many generations of connections here, but who has not been around for a while, if they are new here.

This is not just a social nicety. In an age when everyone yearns for, wants to, needs to have a place, as they said in Cheers, “where everybody knows your name” (even if it takes a few encounters to learn it)...*this* stance, *this* value, this is the foundation for the community of tomorrow.

I know you have hopes, expectations, and bottom lines about what you are looking for in a rabbi. With humility and a sense of awe, I will try to serve you in ways which will, at the least, lift up these hopes.

Here is what I am looking for, what I am working towards, in a congregation. To best build, to best face the Jewish future, I believe in a congregation of **warmth**, and **depth**, and **breadth**. **Warmth**, welcoming all as we are, anyone as they come, in all the shapes and permutations of the Jewish family as it is today. **Depth**, which challenges us to grow, to become more than who we are today. And **breadth**, to be a community in which the values we teach and preach in this place walk with us in to the world around us.

And it is just now, just after writing most of these remarks, that I noticed that, by coincidence, or not, that this headline of the June Tidings, the bulletin of this congregation, refers to the “Blooming” of Beth Israel.

With God’s help, and with our work together, may I, may you, may all of us go, indeed, from strength to strength, to a new season of beauty, fulfillment, sweetness and success.

Shabbat Shalom.