

Once or twice in a lifetime, a man or woman may choose a radical leaving, having heard *Lech l'cha* — Go forth. God disturbs us toward our destiny by hard events and by freedom's now urgent voice which explode and confirm who we are. We don't like leaving, but God loves becoming. These words were written by Norman Hirsh, in our prayerbook, *Mishkan Tefilah*.

Leaving, becoming. Is it destiny? Perhaps. Transition and change, most definitely. There is a saying, the more things change, the more they stay the same. I don't agree with that. I think transition and change are always happening, sometimes in large ways, and sometimes small, though to see it, we may need to slow down and look, as one might suddenly see a small flower growing out of the pavement. In our parashah this week, Aaron is leaving, it is his time to die. His son Eleazar is becoming the High Priest, as he takes on the mantle of his father's work. This moment of transition and significant change is initiated by the instruction:

וְהִפָּשַׁט אֶת־אֶהָרֶן אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְהִלְבִּישָׁתָם אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר בְּנֹו (Num. 20:26)
“Strip Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar. “

Why mention the garments? The mention of the garments in the Torah may seem extraneous, but of course is not – this is necessary, as our 11th century sage, Rashi says, to teach us that there is a relationship between these garments and Aaron's death. Further, the Talmud describes a correlation, that each individual garment of the High Priest atones for a specific sin. I prefer the 13th century sage, Nachmanides, Ramban's explanation though, as in his commentary, he teaches a midrash in which the Rabbis ask, How could Moses strip Aaron of his garments in their proper order? Are not the upper ones always on top, and the lower ones always underneath? – We too might ask, how *does* this work – make a pile of clothing, and then sort them out to dress Eleazar in the correct order of layering the garments? Ramban explains that God bestowed upon Aaron a great honor at the time of his death - that celestial garments first clothed themselves underneath the other garments, and then Moses stripped Aaron of the priestly garments in their proper order, and then put them on Eleazar in the proper order. What's the concern? The concern is that Aaron should not appear naked, that this process should not dishonor him.

Aaron represents the past that we must take care to honor. Eleazar represents the future that we must take care to nurture and protect. In between is the present in which transition and change occur.

This too, is the path of one who chooses to become Jewish, and sits before a rabbinic court, a bet din. Their outer garment may be the actions of “doing Jewish” – the holiday observances – Passover, Shavuot, High Holy Days, Sukkot, Shabbat, the learning of Hebrew words, and prayers, perhaps wearing a kippah, or a star of David...but as a candidate sits before the bet din, we know too, that underneath are the hidden layers, a

leaving behind...perhaps of Christmas Carols and chocolate bunnies...and connection with it too, perhaps not so much about religion, but rather about family and tradition. The hidden layers... The questions so far unarticulated, the fear of not knowing enough, the hope of truly fitting in, of being accepted, the embarrassment of not knowing all the words, or what they mean, *yet*... The deep longing of a Jewish soul, born to parents not Jewish, of longing to be known, of words yet to be spoken. Even one who has taken the long journey, with years of study, years of immersion in Jewish life, and a longing for that final step, implies too, a certain leaving, feeling a little wobbly, a little uncertain. Wondering, how to speak to family, to friends, of their identity – yes, one longed for, but one that has yet to fully integrate past with future.

A new Jew does put on a new garment, a new identity, but with the hidden garments too... of hope, uncertainty, fear, loss, ...joy. Each, a gift, from the divine, like celestial garments, to be discovered, integrated, cherished, and worn with dignity.

Those who have heard *Lech L'cha*, and choose to become Jewish are navigating their way, and it is for us to honor their past, for without that past, they would not have arrived at our door, nor sit before a rabbinic court. And, it is for us, of course, to nurture and be there for them, as the steps they take in the present are precious, as these steps create a new future.

We too, know what it is like to be the stranger, to be one who heard *Lech L'cha*, go – And so it is that we are commanded in the Torah (Ex 22:20) not to wrong or oppress the stranger, for we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. The stranger is mentioned in 64 different verses in the Hebrew bible. Why so many times? One answer is that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's "image." Another answer is from Proverbs:

נֵר יְהוָה נְשָׂמַת אָדָם (Prov. 20:27) *The soul of man is the candle of Adonai.*
Within each human being is a spark of light from God.

The following blessing is from the Shabbat morning service in our prayerbook, and was written by Rabbi Richard Levy, z"l:

You are Praised, Who rolls out the rough, raw clay of the universe into delicate vessels of light; and from nothing at all we could perceive in a world that has turned old, a shimmering new Creation right before our eyes, made this moment just for us. How much of life reveals Your presence? How much Torah unfolds from each new flower, from each new wave that breaks upon the sea! You are Praised, who forms from the clay that cloaks our lives, the delicate vessels which contain our light. *Baruch atah, Adonai, yotzeir ham'orot.*

Shabbat shalom, *Rabbi Lisa Bock*