

(Sue Ezekiel – Chukat: July 05, 2025)

Shabbat Shalom.

This *drash* is dedicated to the blessed memory of Sassoon George Ezekiel, my partner in life for sixty-five years. In this year since his death, George has become a powerful spiritual presence at the core of my being and that of our family. His compassion, love, wisdom, humor, and unshakable faith in the essential goodness of all people continue to sustain us, shape our values, and hold us close as a family.

George immigrated to the United States with his parents in the early 1950s. He was sixteen years old. They came here from Shanghai, Communist China. His grandparents had immigrated to Shanghai from Baghdad, Iraq in the late 1800s. If you're curious about George's life, look him up in the Book of *Memories* (thank you, Diane Birnbaum) in the hallway at the entrance to this Sanctuary.

The Book of *Numbers, Bemidbar*, from which we read today, is about the *midbar*, the desert or wilderness, through which the Exodus generation (Gen-Exodus) of Israelites migrated in search of a better life, after many generations of enslavement in Egypt. After forty years of searching, Gen-Exodus has died (all but their leaders, the three siblings: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses) and they have been replaced by a new generation I shall call Gen-Wilderness. This new generation of

migrants refers to itself as if it were the Gen-Exodus that had been enslaved in Egypt: “Why did you bring *us* up from Egypt to die in the wilderness?” At Passover seders, the Haggadah instructs everyone to do the same—to refer to ourselves as if we had ourselves been enslaved and had undertaken the arduous departure and migration toward freedom.

Wherever George’s family immigrated, they brought their resilience, their recipes and many traditions. One ancient Baghdadi tradition plays out at *our* family seders to this day. Right after *Yachatz*, the breaking of the matzah, we all take a break as well. As the older generations hide the afikoman in one room, the younger generations don costumes in another. When the costumed Israelites,” knock on the door, a bilingual, improvised conversation ensues. The basic structure is as follows:

- Who are you?
- The Israelites.
- Where are you from?
- *Mi mistrayim*, from Egypt.
- Where are you going?
- *Yerushelayim*, to the Promised Land.
- *Baruchim habayim*, welcome, come in!

At this point, the younger generations burst in, looking very much like a mini-Pride parade, playing assorted rhythm instruments, they buoyantly march all around

the house and patio as we all sing the *Miriam's Song*, by Debbie Friedman. Then, we tell our ancient story.

Why is it so important to be able to identify with immigrants escaping unbearable situations? Perhaps it is essential to preserve *our own* humanity to remember that, not only that we have all been immigrants, but that we may become immigrants again.

In an earlier part from today's reading, the Israelites are at Meribah, desperately in need of water. They complain bitterly and angrily to Moses and Aaron. Miriam had accessed wells water *for* them. She had just died, and the Israelites, fearing for their survival, angrily *demand* that Moses and Aaron get them water.

After many mixed messages between Moses and God, water pours forth and Gen-Wilderness is once again rewarded for their fierce complaining. They survive because God, through the hand of Moses, has performed another miracle on their behalf. But this time, God severely punishes Moses and Aaron by sentencing them both to die before the Israelites would enter the Promised Land.

Aviva Zornberg, in her book, *Bewilderments*, suggests that at this point in the story, the use of a miracle to placate the people is:

... a fallback position: what God wants is [for Moses] to educate the people to their new post-wilderness lives in the Land, and to the practices that will enable them to live organically in a new place and time.” (p. 227)

Zornberg’s commentary suggests that this generation needs to learn how to survive. In the part of the story we read today, after Aaron dies, the Israelites complain yet again, this time to God and Moses. But *this* time, instead of being rewarded with another miracle, they are attacked by lethal viper-serpents.

In response, instead of making angry demands, the Israelites seem to sense that their complaining and demanding days are over. They plead with Moses to *ask* God to take away the venomous snakes. God tells Moses to make a bronze image of a snake and hold it up high so that, when anyone is bitten, they have only to *look up* at it to heal. Moses does this, and it is effective. Uri Alter suggests in a note to his translation that “the sight of the bronze image of the serpent becomes an antidote for the serpents’ poisonous bite.”

Instead of being rewarded for complaining, the Israelites were punished with deadly serpents. By following the direction to *look up* at the bronze replica, they were healed. The very next time the Israelites receive water from a well they sing a song of thanks for the God-given ability of *humans* to discover and dig for underground springs in the desert. Instead of *expecting* to receive water, they seem to realize that

they can obtain their own life-giving water. In these ways, we see that they are becoming resilient, resourceful, and optimistic.

By having identified with Gen-Exodus, Gen-Wilderness has internalized what it takes to leave a bad situation. Now, Gen-Wilderness is learning skills for survival that they will pass on to future generations.

As we continue to share stories from past generations to pass their values on to future generations, may a core value we continue to emphasize be:

We are all immigrants in the wilderness of life, seeking to find our way. Welcoming and helping each other on our journeys is a blessing for everyone involved.

As we say, *m'dor l'dor*, from generation to generation.

Shabbat Shalom.