



“IF THE SANDALS FIT, WEAR THEM”

Last week, I walked 14 miles through rural Virginia carrying a Torah as part of America’s Journey for Justice. America’s Journey is the NAACP’s 46-day, 1000-mile march from Selma, AL to Washington, DC, calling for a national re-commitment to the rights of every American. I was honored to be part of the march along with almost 200 other Reform Rabbis and thousands of people of every walk of life. And I was honored to walk behind a remarkable soul, a disabled veteran who two decades ago took the name Middle Passage in remembrance of his ancestors’ experience of slavery. Middle Passage carried a full size American Flag every single day of the march and set the pace for all of us, a pace I sometimes found hard to keep up with. Yesterday I learned that at the 920th mile, Middle Passage suffered a fatal heart attack. My heart aches for his family and I am grateful to have had 24 hours with a man whose memory will surely be for blessing. Among the many lessons I learned from the march is the example of man who literally spent the last days of his life in the pursuit of justice for all.

During the march, I had a lot of help carrying the Torah but my feet covered every inch of those 14 miles so tonight what I want to say is – my feet are tired. If I wasn’t so short, I’d take my shoes off right now – but then the 4000 of you in the back wouldn’t see more than the top of my head over this podium. But listen, you can take off your shoes if you want. Really. Run your toes through grass – RHUS is a time and place to find your spirit in comfort, not in constriction.

Are you comfortable? Good. Now let me tell you a story. It’s a story that’s found in many different story-telling traditions – Bedouin, Muslim, Jewish and others. I learned it from a new friend, Rabbi Nancy Wechsler.

Here’s how it goes: There was once a poor man named Abu Kasim. Abu Kasim lived in a little shack that he didn’t own, on a bit of land that he didn’t own with a couple of scraggly old trees that didn’t bear any fruit at all. Abu Kasim was so poor that he had only two pairs of pants and two shirts. When one was dirty, he put on the other and washed the first, hanging them out to dry on a frayed old rope between his two scraggly trees.

Well one day Abu Kasim’s ship came in and no one is really sure how. Maybe he won a lottery? Maybe he found a buried treasure? Maybe he finally made a good business deal. But however it happened, Abu Kasim wasn’t just comfortable, overnight he became one of the wealthiest men in town.

Well, with all his new-found means, as you can imagine, the first thing Abu Kasim did was buy himself another pair of pants. Then he got rid of the old, worn pairs of pants and in fact, bought himself a beautiful new wardrobe. He got a haircut and a shave down in the village. He bought the land on which he’d lived for 60 years of his life and where his lowly hovel had been, he built a sweet little house.

What he did not do, was buy new shoes. Abu Kasim considered it. He could well afford a new pair. But truth be told, he loved his old

sandals. He’d worn them ever since his feet reached their full size and they fit him perfectly. They stretched in the places he needed extra room, but they held tight and didn’t rub in the spots that were smaller. “Another pair would give me blisters,” he thought. “Another pair wouldn’t feel so good.” So, he wore them, his old ratty sandals with his beautiful new clothes.

Well, you can imagine how that went over in the village...when neighbors saw Abu Kasim walking through the village in his beautiful new clothes and ratty old sandals, they would say “Abu Kasim, congratulations on your great good fortune” They would hug him and wish him peace. But then some of them would pull him aside and whisper, “You know Abu Kasim, only a friend would tell you this, but you look ridiculous. Those beautiful clothes with those horrible sandals? Get yourself a new pair!” And you can probably imagine that SOME of his neighbors weren’t that discreet. When they weren’t laughing and pointing, they were telling him directly “Abu Kasim, you don’t deserve your great good fortune if you don’t even have the sense to buy better shoes!” and then they would laugh.

At first, Abu Kasim would defend his sandals, trying to convey how much they meant to him. With a small tear in the corner of his eye, he would say that his old sandals had been stalwart and steady, they had been the guardians of his feet. When nothing else had been easy or good in his life, his sandals had kept him going and how could he toss them aside? But you know how people are....they just rolled their eyes.

Eventually, Abu Kasim relented. Or some might say that he saw the light. He went down to the shoemaker and bought a pair that even he had to admit look awfully good with this new pants. Still...it was hard.

You might think that buying those new shoes was the hardest part but it wasn’t. Parting with his old friends, the sandals, was excruciating. Then one night, with a heavy heart, he paddled out to the middle of the river. Lovingly and sadly, he pitched his old sandals into the depths of the water and went home.

The very next day at dawn, the local fishermen were out in their boats, pulling up their traps. Among their catch that day - abu kasim’s sandals, which of course they recognized. Before he had finished his morning’s coffee, there came a pounding on his front door. When he opened it, Abu Kasim found no one there. But when he looked down, his old sandals were sitting on the mat.

Abu Kasim was determined to follow the new path he’d started on because – after all – the sandals really didn’t fit with his new beautiful clothes, his new lifestyle. So, rather than slide his feet into the sandals warm embrace, he turned and left the sandals sitting outside the door. Late that night, so late that no one and nothing was even thinking about moving, Abu Kasim went out into his yard and between the two scraggly old trees that had held his clothesline for so long he dug a deep, deep hole. When it was deep enough, he dropped his beloved old sandals in. He filled the hole, dusted off his hands and went in to sleep.

In the morning, he Abu Kasim was startled awake to the sound of banging on his door. To his shock and dismay he found the King's royal guard standing in his yard. "Abu Kasim," the captain said, "We know that you are very rich now. We see this fresh hole you've dug and we know that you are burying your wealth to keep it from the taxman. You should know better. It is forbidden. All the treasure we find in that hole will belong to the King. All of it. Did you think you could outsmart us?"

The captain ordered his guard to dig as Abu Kasim stood speechless, watching. Furiously they shoveled the freshly turned earth out the hole onto Abu Kasim's yard. When they reached the bottom of the hole, sweating from their efforts they brought out...a pair of old sandals. Wordlessly, with a look of scorn and frustration, the captain threw the sandals at Abu Kasim's feet and left shaking his head.

Some people would have been infuriated, foiled at each attempt to turn over a new leaf, but to tell you the truth, Abu Kasim was glad. In fact, he was absolutely overjoyed. In his heart of hearts, he had always loved those sandals, even though people thought they didn't go with his new fancy clothes, even though he could afford to buy dozens of new pairs, even though he had tried to toss them aside. Standing in his yard, still wearing his nightclothes, Abu Kasim slid his feet into his sandals and they fit, as they always had, as they always would. And they felt good.

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year, an opportunity to start fresh and take new paths. We are called to turn over a new leaf, to snip off the old leaves so that new ones can grow. We can do better, we can BE better in the new year than we were in the last.

Rosh Hashanah and the days of reflection that follow call us to clear out that which is unnecessary and unhelpful in our lives. Many of us have destructive habits that should go - smoking, drinking too much, acquiring too many things we really do not need. Many of us have patterns that don't help us be what we could be - procrastinating, worrying, or venting our work frustrations on the people who love us at home. Some of us ride high on ego-trips and some of us bottom out from lack of self-esteem. It would be good to clear those things out of our closets and give ourselves the space to renew and refresh.

But Abu Kasim learned what we sometimes forget - that in seeking renewal, change and growth, we don't have to abandon, in fact we must remember to hold on to what has made us whole in the past. What are the good old sandals that kept you going in the past? If you left a job that wasn't good for a great new one, but it now fills time when you used to do yoga or go to Shabbat services, Abu Kasim might say - adjust your timing but don't give up the yoga or Shabbat. If the walks you took with your old dog gave you space and time to breathe, to reflect, but the new dog, whom you adore, does her business in no time at all, you don't have to get rid of the new dog. But maybe you need to take her back home while you continue your walk. If having a child in your life means you went from a couple to three or more and your endless scrabble games and impromptu movie nights no longer seem to fit with the schedule of your family, try to remember that Abu Kasim's sandals didn't seem to fit either. Scrabble games could be shorter and movie nights planned instead of impromptu but just as Abu Kasim needed his sandals, you do too.

And what if you're listening to all this talk of sandals and you don't feel like you've ever had a pair - something that supports you, comforts you, makes you feel like you're home? Well now is the

time to go shoe shopping. But don't settle for the first shiny high heels you see. Those will definitely give you blisters. Instead, look for something solid and time-tested. Look to the ancient wisdom of Judaism or try out what worked for your parents or your best friend. Come talk to me, even, I've got some great soul-sandals to suggest.

But most importantly, when you find a pair that fits, sandals that makes you feel whole and don't cause you or anyone else harm, embrace them and make time for them. Whether it's yoga, long walks, or knitting, reading comics, collecting rocks, or Shabbat services, whether its baking or painting or poetry or decoupage or Harry Potter or the Zoo, prayer or music, or dance, don't let anyone tell you that they don't fit with the life you live and don't tell that to yourself.

Shana Tova u'metuka. May it be a sweet and healthy new year and may your sandals stay on your feet where they belong. Amen.