

Shabbat shalom. I'm so grateful that we've all gathered here tonight - first just because we all quite need Shabbat this week, but also to honor this evening as Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Shabbat. So what is that and what are we doing here?

Tonight, we'll hear in their own words the experiences that many of our members have had as they meet this world with some kind of disability. With some way in which the world, society, and even CBE, was not built for their ease. I'm using the word "their" and "they," but I think one of the most powerful things we will find tonight is that it's very much not about a "they," but in fact is very much about a "we." And here's what I mean by that . . . as best told by our Torah portion this week, parshat Bo.

So we're in the story in which our people are enslaved in Mitzrayim, ancient Egypt. And Moses, instructed by God, goes to Pharaoh and says: Let my people go to worship our God - a three day journey from here. That's all I'm asking.

And Pharaoh asks: *va'mi ha'holchim?* And who are the ones to go? The commentator Or Hachaim teaches that in this moment, "Pharaoh is actually asking a rhetorical question.... It had not occurred to him that all of them would go. ... He had naturally assumed that only adult males would participate in the (worship experience)" and everyone else would be left behind.

Oh Pharaoh ... we empathize with your assumption, because it's exactly the kind of assumption that many of us make all the time. That public space. That worship. That gatherings and ritual and community ... are meant mainly to serve the majority identity. In this case "adult males." And in the case of general society - the most able-bodied or neurotypical among us are the assumed participants around whom these experiences are built. Pharaoh made an assumption about who worship was for.

But Moses offers Pharaoh a corrective that is utterly beautiful on this night. He says: **בְּנֵעָרֵינוּ וּבְזִקְנֵינוּ נֵלֵךְ** ... **וּבְזִקְנֵינוּ נֵלֵךְ**. Pharaoh, we will ALL go. From our young ones to our elders, we will ALL go, for it is a celebration for our God. In Torah, we call what Moses does here a "merism," . . . "from our young to our old" is like saying "from A to Z," and meaning "and everything in between." From one edge of community to the other, *nelech* . . . every one of us will go. We are simply not whole and cannot continue our journey if this, if worship, if spiritual life, is built for only a few of us. And when we imagine ways for including everyone, what happens? Chag L'adonai **LANU** - the text says: it becomes a celebration that is holy **for us all**.

We know well, though, that this is not generally what happens. In many spaces, including in this community, we often defer to able-bodied and neurotypical assumptions. But over the past months and even years, several different teams of people have been working to make our community more accessible for all people. Because we are committed to a Mosaic worldview, not a Pharaonic worldview. To Moses' *nelech*, and not Pharaoh's assumption that community is only for those in a certain category of ability.

So tonight we will hear many voices. Because for spiritual life to unfold, we'll all need to go together. All included. None left behind.

So many of us have obstacles before us - whether it's physical or emotional, visible or invisible, temporary or permanent, new to us or has always been. So we're going to take our time to listen, and begin to understand these contours of our community together. We're not in a rush tonight, so we thank you now for your patience and attention.

One quick story before we hear from our community: Last year, Cantor Breitzer and I had the honor of leading several b'nei mitzvah services together for neurodiverse young people. In these spaces, we make it clear that whatever the young person needs, can happen - we can take a break, they can get up and walk around, have some quiet, all great. So in the middle of one service, at the end of some prayer, one bar mitzvah boy raised his hand, because he had something to say. He wanted to tell everyone that it's unkind to bully people for who they are, that he's experienced this in his life and he doesn't want it to happen to anyone else. When he finished, we resumed the service. His might have been the most important words spoken that afternoon.

But here's the thing - it's not what he did or needed that was extraordinary. It was that for one hour, we lived in his world. Instead of asking him to conform to a neurotypical world. And it was beautiful. And nothing broke. And we were all elevated. And there was relief and joy and beauty.

So one question I'm holding onto is this: how do we keep expanding the world that we live in so that we are all conforming ourselves less just to be part of spiritual or social life? How do we let the multitude of lived experiences shape who we are? How do we really lean toward making this a chag Adonai **LANU**? That will be our task. We will make many mistakes, we will fall short. It will be a journey, sometimes a very long one, but in the learning and listening, we will find our way.

So let's! We invite forward now our speakers who will share their stories. We'll begin with Orit Jacoby Carroll.