

“Facing Forward”

July 9, 2005

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And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock
twice with his rod.

That was the purported “cause.” Now we read the effect, just a verse later:

But the Lord said to Moses...’Because you did not
trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight
of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead
this congregation into the land that I have given them.

I am not alone in finding this excessive. After everything Moses had succeeded in doing at the behest of God and all that he had tolerated from his spoiled and bellyaching people, was it really such an unforgivable offense to twice strike that rock rather than, as God had instructed, to speak to it? The text declares it a lack of trust on Moses’ part:

Did Moses simply doubt it would work as God had described – that by ordering the water to flow from the rock, it really would have done so? Once before, under the same circumstances, God told Moses to strike the rock once. So, this time he struck it twice instead of speaking to it. Where’s the big sin here? The sages have long explained that Moses spoiled the whole special effect. The Israelites were supposed to have marveled at the power of the spoken word directed in God’s name at that senseless stone. By striking it instead, Moses not only belied a serious deficit of belief, but also prevented the people from seeing that water flows in abundance even from a rock in the desert, if God wills it. So, this theory states that God punished Moses for an over-inflated ego. Second guessing!

Are you still as unconvinced as I am? What if it was Moses’ loss of his temper? After all, it reflects poorly on a leader who loses his cool and angrily address his followers as “you rebels!”?

Well, if you don’t find that explanation compelling, here’s another – a possibility offered by the ancient rabbis: God punished Moses for his accumulated sins and shortcomings by firing him from the job as the number one prophet of his people. After all, he killed that Egyptian taskmaster, didn’t he?

Let me try your patience no further. I know the real reason – or, rather, I have a Midrash I like best. Our people were never really easy to please. In his early years, and even in middle age, Moses could handle it their faithlessness and their suspicion. But, I suppose one’s patience wears thin by the time one reaches 100 or 110. A new generation born and raised in freedom pushed Moses’ buttons. They longed for an Egypt they had never even seen and preferred the imagined pleasures of slavery to the present discomforts of freedom. In his younger years, Moses could have handled it. But somehow, this time they had crossed the line. So Moses and his brother (equally weary) just gave up and ran off to the sanctuary. You see now what happened? They burned out – the disillusionment of old age caused Moses to passively seek refuge within the

confines of the sacred tent. Clearly, a new generation needed of a new leader to bring them into their promised land. Even for Moses, the time had come – to move out of the way and to welcome change.

Everyone and everything must also accept the inevitability of change. We're wise to face forward. Of course, most of us prefer to look backward, rather than forward. It's much easier to remember where we've been than to figure out where we're going. We avoid change and naturally distrust the new. But, yesterday ultimately prepares us for today and helps us plan for tomorrow. Those who have ever tried walking ahead while looking back know very well that such foolish behavior is a prelude to catastrophe. Wherever we are in our lives, it seems to me we ought not count on arriving in the Promised Land. It's the loving journey that counts the most, because that's where we ultimately find joy. And, the journey constantly calls us to change, redefine, grow, and transform toward the new.

As the last several months have passed since Aaron and Jennifer became engaged, I've felt (and I'm sure you have too, in similar circumstances in your own family) the emotional tug and pull. You don't have to be a member of the cast of *Fiddler* to understand that phenomenon. Marrying off a son or daughter is an emotional roller coaster.

While I'm happy, delighted, and grateful at the prospect of welcoming Aaron and his entire wonderful family to our family, the sweet memories of this "little girl" sometimes taunt me and alert me that she has grown. And for goodness sakes, she's older than Andrea and I were when we married. And Jennifer and Aaron have distinguished themselves far more than we had by then. So, I've faced forward.

So, I've been visiting and enjoying the official Jennifer and Aaron wedding web site. Have you seen it? It fascinates me. I enjoy reading the wonderful messages of love that so many of you have left for them. Their "worldwide engagement tour" has proceeded from Boston to South Beach, the blizzard of January in New York to the hurricane of July in New Orleans, from L.A. to Hanoi and Saigon and Hong Kong, to Cherry Hill and back to Boston. And we've still got three and a half months to go. We've recently gleaned precious photos of Jennifer from all of our old scrapbooks and begun to help Tina with the project that she has in mind. We've really enjoyed the search for the perfect photos. We face forward as we anticipate engagement photos and soon wedding photos yet to come.

Facing forward, we also carefully trimmed a small portion of lace from Andrea's wedding gown, so that it can be discreetly incorporated into Jennifer's beautiful gown.

More than ever, participating as Dad in these past months and seeing it all up close and personal, I sense all the more the natural energy and proper direction of our lives. Face forward friends, and with faith and thanksgiving, grab hold of your future and embrace it. Never be afraid! Everything changes, so have confidence and don't miss a moment of the adventure. Says Yogi Berra: "I've seen the future; it's very much like the present, but longer!"

Now, Jennifer and Aaron, I've done some research. My recent readings inform me that you are both members of Generation X: the post-baby-boomer generation born between 1965 and 1980. Your generation grew up on both television and personal computers.

In Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel entitled *Generation X*, the characters of his novel supposedly describe a goodly number of your fellow Generation X'ers. According to Coupland, Generation X'ers are "Overeducated, underemployed, intensely private, and unpredictable."

Coupland's novel more than intimates that many of Generation X are "Often cynical, frustrated, pessimistic, conflicted, and indecisive."

I know that Tina and Howard, you join with Andrea and me in thanks that our Generation X'ers are atypical!

Honestly, I confess, some of Coupland's theories add up for me. If ignorance is bliss, one ought not expect the overeducated to be placid and tranquil. Many sense, as the authors of the book *Quarter Life Crisis* point out, a lack of predictable direction from members of Generation X. After all these years of education, the real world proves to be perplexing for Generation X'ers and uncooperative, contrary to expectations.

The experts note that members of Generation X marry later than we baby boomers did. By the time many of your peers reach their mid-thirties, chances are, they will have experienced the randomness of life – its fantastic highs and its vulnerabilities, as well. So, that's just a little bit of what the social scientists say about your generation. I, for one, bet your experience won't be all that different from any other generation's, give or take a few years. Earlier or later, life is life. And for all of the psychobabble hype, it's a wonderful, exciting, often baffling, sometimes disappointing, but never boring ride.

Aaron and Jennifer, we often hear disparaging remarks from the experts about how in the past the economy and the state of the nation or the world, the flood supply, the global warming, the air quality, the practice of medicine, the faithfulness of the faithful, the national bureaucracy, the system of justice, the price of tofu, whatever were all better in the past. And experts say "too bad" – the good old days are gone and we'll all just have to do as best as we can.

What foolishness! Taken as a whole, there is no time better than today and there was much about those "good old days" (if you could even find them) that was, frankly, terrible. Facing forward – Aaron and Jennifer – the two of you incorporate every virtue and every quality of character that will serve to heighten your joy as each other's soul partners in life.

Face forward, happily look to the future in the delight of what you will be honored to bring to it! In our case, we're all grateful we will be giving you to the future!

Of course, I'm just a little biased. But, with your intelligence, patience, unconditional love, and trusting faith, you will take hold of the many years ahead and build a worthy Jewish life and home that would even put a smile on old Moses' face.

Nothing could more please those generations of our families who've gone before you – your parents and siblings and aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens. Their pride and love for you flows unbounded.

And so, with great delight and pleasure in the presence of this congregation that has been there with you, Jennifer, in so many other milestone occasions in our lives, we ask you and Aaron to come forward now to stand before the arc as we pray for God's blessings upon the two of you.

JENNIFER MICHELLE COHN and AARON SETH KESSELHEIM
July 9, 2004

O Heavenly Father, Source of all life:

The Sabbath morning we ask Your blessing upon this woman and this man who will soon stand before You as bride and groom. Guide Jennifer and Aaron on their life's journey; and may the sacred commitments of their wedding day sustain them all the days of their lives.

Ours is the most heartfelt prayer that the love which binds them be strong and lasting, and that under all circumstances their hearts will be filled with patience and understanding for one another.

May they be blessed with health, courage, and good fortune, their love and friendship deepening through the years. And may their home be a sanctuary of devotion and commitment in which peace - Shalom - will forever abide.

Amen

(Cantor leads us in the final prayer in song)