

Reimagining the Promised Land...as Temple President
during a Pandemic

by Amanda Ferguson and Meg Marion

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Meg: Welcome to Part Two of the unannounced two-part D'var Torah series, casually entitled: Promised Land? What is this Promised Land and how do you get there during a pandemic? Spoiler Alert: while the pandemic is devastatingly real, our journeys through it are as unique as we each are. Last week, Tim Kessler spoke about how he has discovered and benefited from gussying up his home and his head from the inside out. In short, Tim went all Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, concluding that there's no place like home and he has made the most of it.

Amanda's journey is much more akin to Moses,' albeit without God's determination that Amanda would not be entering the Promised Land aka the Sanctuary. Amanda, would you please read the beginning of parasha Va'etchanan?

Amanda reads.

“3:23] I pleaded with the Eternal at that time, saying, 24] "O Eternal God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! 25] Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." 26] But the Eternal was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The Eternal One said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! 27] Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan. 28] Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see."

Meg: So, Va'etchanan means And I pleaded. As you heard, Moses pleaded with God to change God's mind and let him in, but God isn't having any of it. Likewise, Amanda has been in the unenviable position of leading the Temple from her home. Yet, is it possible that Amanda, like Tim, might

have found gold at the end of her rainbow in Maumelle?
Let's ask her.

Amanda, when the pandemic first grounded us in March of 2020, you weren't yet Temple President — that would happen in June. How would you describe that period and what did you glean from it?

Amanda: This was a scary time, because all of a sudden there was no playbook of "how we'd always done things". I watched Carol (who has been an amazing mentor and support), asked questions of Rabbi, Carol, and Eileen, and began to assess our needs, the most immediate of which was forming a Covid task Force to guide us through. I am neither doctor nor scientist, so I needed to surround myself with those who were on the front lines, and those who had knowledge of medicine and epidemiology. I had to reimagine what being President of the Temple looked like, because I knew it had never looked like this before. The things I'd planned to focus my presidency on--such as leadership development and education-- had to take a backseat to steering us safely through a pandemic, and developing a new, if temporary, normal. Ultimately, my goal has been to not transmit Covid at Temple, while still

providing the best congregant experience possible. Sometimes these goals have been at odds with each other, but people have been amazingly supportive, empathetic, and sympathetic.

Meg: That was a good start, particularly in terms of the Temple. But what about you, Amanda? You'd taken up the mantle of the Temple presidency and, like Moses, sought to lead our congregation through the desert aka pandemic, yet you couldn't so much as enter the sanctuary. Last week, Tim spoke about various forms of self-care. How have you managed yourself, your expectations, and dispelled preconceived notions about your presidency?

Amanda: I'd already recognized that this presidency was going to be the very definition of unprecedented, so I'd need to find ways to adjust to ever-swirling winds of change. I could ill afford to neglect myself with such challenges ahead.

A lot of you know that just prior to the pandemic, I'd begun a weight loss journey that has ultimately resulted in my losing 130 lbs. I knew I'd need to be healthy and strong, not only to keep up with my full time job, young adult autistic son, and now the Temple presidency, but to fight the virus should I get it. I pushed myself to make major life changes, becoming a regular exerciser and modifying the way I eat. It wasn't an easy journey, but coming out the other side I'm a better me, which allows me to be better at all I do.

Emotionally, this has been a scary time as well. Often the decisions regarding Covid protocols in my professional life and in Temple life were very different, and sometimes completely opposed to one another. I had to develop a lot more flexibility and tolerance than I had before. I'm so thankful for the friendships I have, for my husband and son who are always my cheering squad, and the support and kind words from so many of our community and congregation. When my family all got Covid, so many of you reached out to us and offered help or meals or just kind words. When I lost an aunt and then a nephew during the pandemic—neither from Covid, and neither unexpected but still horrible--this community offered me so much love and

support. I'm continually blown away by the kindness of our congregation.

One of the best healthy things I did during the pandemic was put miles on my feet. When I first started walking for exercise, two miles was my limit and that was exhausting. Through walking with friends, and especially with my friend Jana Cohen, I have worked my way up to ten miles (not every time of course but weekly as often as possible). Sometimes we walk for exercise, sometimes to burn stress, and always for friendship and conversation. As Moses walked through the desert to the promised land, we walked the river trail, brainstorming solutions and ways for the community to gather and be more connected while still being safely distanced. We've solved all the world's problems more than once on our walks!!

Meg: I bet you have. What have you learned about yourself that you didn't know beforehand?

Amanda: Gosh, that's a tough question. I think I've changed a lot—I've learned to work on myself. You may know, I'm a talker. I'm not afraid to assert my opinion. But as Temple President, I am learning the importance of listening. People

deserve to be heard, and I certainly do NOT have all the answers. By working on my listening skills, I am learning to put others first and see the bigger picture. I can sometimes get excited about something or hooked on my own idea, but by being quiet and listening to others I am able to see the forest for the trees. I also learned that it is ok to NOT have the answer, to ask for some time, and to consult others. There are some pretty amazing folks both in our office and on our board, and if we work together and share ideas while listening to each other we can come up with some pretty great stuff.

I also learned that, as much as I dislike expressing emotion, it is fundamental to being healthy. I need to talk about the stress of hoping our decisions are protecting everyone and have my feelings validated. I need to talk about the isolation of being quarantined and the fear of then going back to work in a public library. I need to talk about my concerns about Covid transmission to congregants and Temple staff. Tim told y'all last week about starting therapy and what a game changer that was for him. I wholeheartedly agree. I've had a therapist for years and without his support, validation, and often not so gentle nudging, I'm a stronger and better person, more confident, and I have more flexibility and

empathy than before. I'm learning to keep my eyes on what's important, and not get bogged down in the small stuff.

Meg: That was awesome. What has been the upside of this time period for you?

Amanda: That is a great question, and one we need to ask ourselves more. There have been some pretty great things, too. First and foremost, my mom and I can attend Temple together from afar. She is on this zoom tonight: HI MOM. We sure have learned that we can adapt to almost anything. It has really been amazing to watch the congregation come together and support the Temple. To see so many people logging on for services and programs, learning events and book clubs. It blows me away how wonderful our congregants are.

I've also been able to spend lots of extra time with my family, Most moms of high school seniors barely see their kids, but mine has been home and excited to spend family time together. Would I have wished this last year and a half to be different for him? Of course. I would have given my right arm to see him walk across the high school graduation

stage, but that wasn't in the cards. BUT I did get to watch his resilience. I got to watch him find ways to help others, like driveway concerts for friends and neighbors to boost their spirits when we were locked down. I got to have several weekend getaways in the woods with my husband, which we never have time for but were able to do while my work was shut down. I'll gladly take extra time with my two guys anytime since there is never enough. But, I'm looking forward to watching Teddy launch and start his life. I've attended Temple and Torah study from my comfy purple chair, propped up on pillows on my bed, from the dining room and living room. Sometimes even in my pajamas!!! And at work, we've discovered new and different ways to help people, to reach out to needy and at risk communities, and to provide library services in ways we never dreamed of before. So yes, while Covid is no fun, there were *definitely* some positives.

Meg: Since there can never be enough Wizard of Oz references in a D'var Torah, I know you'll join me in thanking Amanda for giving us such an interesting peek behind the curtain, and for all that she, Rabbi, Eileen, Keila, Milton, the musicians, the Covid committee and countless

others have done to keep our Promised Land intact. Shabbat Shalom!