

Vision Statement

During Passover, we read from the Haggadah: “*arami oved avi...*” “my ancestor was a wandering Aramean...” This ancestor went down to Egypt, was enslaved, was redeemed, and eventually entered a promised land. In that promised land, our ancestor was free and expressed gratitude for the life they had been allowed to inherit. This ritual reading is intended to be an embodied experience. In a different part of the Haggadah we are commanded to “see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt.” The story of our ancestor is *our* story. We, the Jewish people, individually and collectively, have a narrative arc that stretches from wandering to slavery to redemption to freedom. That story is the foundation of our identity as Jews and the foundation for how I plan to build Jewish community.

I have often felt like a wanderer in my life. As a child, my family moved multiple times and I experienced vastly different ways of living. In first grade, my family moved from my father’s hometown of Rochester, New York across the country to rural northern California, where we needed to travel forty-five minutes into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains to find Jewish community. Then, at the beginning of middle school, we moved again, to a suburb of Portland, Oregon, and joined a large synagogue where rather than being one of twenty in religious school, I was one of two hundred. In both places, I could have been lost or alone, but instead, my family ensured that even as newcomers in new places, we would be bound to the Jewish community and build meaningful lives.

As I begin my rabbinate, my goal is to develop strong Jewish wanderers. I do not mean that all Jews should be transient or nomads, moving from place to place without settling. A wanderer is someone likely to open themselves up to questions that change the way they see the world. Much of my professional experience comes from working with young Jews in various contexts like working with teens in NFTY and BBYO or with college students at Ohio University Hillel. These young people are looking for ways to connect and grow and they love questions. They seek meaning in the world and are never quite satisfied with where they are at any given moment. From working with these wanderers, I have learned that wandering is not a problem for contemporary Judaism but can actually be an effective model for Jewish engagement. People engage people—I learned this when I grew up and was engaged in Jewish life by my parents and Jewish mentors at my synagogues. I learned it again as a professional, as I taught teens and college students what it means to build community even when place and space are not guaranteed.

While the wandering of my childhood was not my choice, I actively decided to become a wanderer when I moved across the country to Washington, DC for college. For the first time, I had to create a Jewish life for myself. I was amazed to find that even on my own it was not a lonely experience, but instead was exciting and full of possibility. Set with foundation that my family and Jewish community had provided, I could explore and push boundaries, try on new ideas, and meet people I never would have otherwise.

Fulfilled by my college wandering, I committed again to a move, this time leaving DC for “a place I did not know” (the promised land of the United States--Boca Raton, Florida) for my first job out of school. I was able to make this move because the work I would be doing was for the sake of Jewish community—engaging Jewish teens for the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County. I knew I could find a home in Florida, despite having no connection to the local community, because my parents and family had shown me how the importance of place and space can pale in comparison to the importance of people. In Florida, I was lucky enough to match over a Jewish dating app with Phylicia, now my wife. Now, I will never wander alone and together we have learned the meaning of the phrase “not all who wander are lost.”

Being a wanderer is not about a destination, it is about a worldview. The Israelites did not wander in the desert for forty years because they were lost. On the contrary, even if one missed the “left turn at Albuquerque,” travel from Egypt to Canaan should have been a matter of days, not decades. The reason that the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years was because they needed to change their worldview. The Israelites had lived for too long as slaves and could not grasp the meaning of freedom. It took a new generation, a generation raised as wanderers, to understand the value of calling a land a home. The story of wandering in our tradition is a story about coming to terms with new ideas and meanings and assimilating them into our worldview.

We know that this mythical narrative of wandering is vital to the Jewish people, even today. Passover is our most widely and consistently celebrated Jewish holiday. In the 2013 Pew Research study “A Portrait of American Jews,” 70% of respondents said they had participated in Passover celebrations within the past year. While that study concluded that a growing number of Jews were identifying as having “no religion,” (a trend that has only continued in the intervening seven years) and that formal affiliation rates were dropping, Passover remained among the most stable Jewish traditions, regardless of affiliation. What is clear is that the story of Judaism--the story of wandering—can drive Jewish engagement.

The text “my ancestor was a wandering Aramean,” did not originate in the Haggadah. It comes from a ritual, described in the Torah, centered around the Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites were expected to bring their *bikkurim*, their “first fruits” of a harvest to the Temple as a sacrifice to God. In doing so, they acknowledged, out loud, the narrative of wandering that eventually granted them the capability to offer a valuable sacrifice.

Here are my first fruits, the results of my wandering and the gifts that I hope to cultivate along my journeys. I will build a community of wanderers, that even if satisfied and comforted by their place and space, are never afraid to question the status quo. I will engage people, knowing that our communities of meaning will rely on the people who show up. I will ensure that Judaism is encompassing enough and exciting enough to be an individual’s worldview, that it gives us a framework for making meaning during our wandering.