

“Think of how bland it would be if we didn’t know how to sing, how to dance; if we did not know how to carve poles--we need these things and they are gifts to everybody”

- Barbara Wilson

Standing beneath the roof of the Chodorow synagogue at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, Israel, was a coalescent moment that has informed my rabbinate. I remember staring at the ceiling in awe and admiration of the paintings gilding the interior of the roof. The images were vibrant and colorful and came to life above my head. The images touched me in a powerful way. As a rabbinical student, I had never seen anything like it in our synagogues; as an artist and woodcarver, I had never seen anything like it; and as the grandchild of survivors, I had been told precious little about prewar Europe. I felt that a noticeable void had existed. I felt a need to fill the void and attempt to restore something that had been lost. On that day, I committed myself to creating an exact replica of a majestic Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark) from one of the vanished wooden synagogues and bringing it back into ritual use. The project *Opening the Ark* was the brainchild of this moment of epiphany.

During the next two years of rabbinical seminary, I spent much time every evening refining my woodcarving skills. In my final year of rabbinical seminary, I was ready. I began soliciting grants from local and national organizations. I incorporated a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization, and I began managing a team of engineers, woodcarvers, architects, and volunteers.

When COVID-19 hit, the project was propelled to greater heights and proceeded faster than ever. Quickly, the pool of skilled and apprentice volunteers grew exponentially. I designated a volunteer coordinator. The project received new grants as it grew. As the world fell into a state of pandemonium, *Opening the Ark* provided us all with a gift—something that could not be taken

away from us with all the restrictions: art. The tragic irony is that one catastrophe, the Holocaust, nearly wiped out this art form, yet we are reviving it during another catastrophe, COVID-19.

Beginning in February, the Ark will go on exhibition with a debut gala at the Skirball Museum. The opening gala on February 19 will include a Torah service broadcast to 17,000 followers on social media across the multiple platforms of HUC, the Skirball Museum, and the *Opening the Ark* project. At that moment, we will transfer the Ark formally and spiritually to the Jewish people. It will travel from synagogue to synagogue and museum to museum as a testament to our story and experience.

However, as we launch the Ark into the ritual and museum spaces, something else has come to mind that will define my rabbinate in the future. Building an ark is not enough for my rabbinate. *More important are the people who are called to the Torah which we take from the ark.* Our Jewish identity is built upon actually opening the ark and reading from it, from celebrating with its Torah in simchas (joyous occasions), rituals, daily and weekend services, and sharing our Torah lovingly from generation to generation. For me, the congregation is the place in which to enact these holy duties.

The absence of matter is what motivated me to recreate an Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark) from prewar Europe. Yet, how sad would it be to imagine a pristine synagogue with a noticeable void left by the absence of the actual congregation? This is a very real scenario for many American synagogues. It is this same motivation that drove me to rebuild a perished item of our heritage that will propel me into congregational life tomorrow. In order to thrive in 2021, we must create a growing community of embrace, family, inclusion, and acceptance. This is the direction of Judaism for the future.

Today, we are at a crossroads within Judaism, amplified by COVID-19. Many of our buildings, schools, institutions, and prayers are at risk of becoming outdated very quickly; swallowed by modernity. We will need to rethink Judaism for tomorrow. *Our message of tomorrow must be one of radical inclusion, the embrace of family, and of Jewish continuity.* This will be the next big chapter of my rabbinate. I am humbled by the opportunity of sharing Torah in the future and calling up congregants to stand before our Torah and to celebrate sacred occasions.