

**A Cloud and a Pillar of Fire:
A Tribute to Carol Pfeifer Parham,
President, Congregation B'nai Israel, 2018-2020
*Shabbat B'ha-a-lot'cha 5780***

June 12, 2020

Rabbi Barry H. Block

The cloud and the pillar of fire are powerful motifs in the design of Temple B'nai Israel—depicted here in the Sanctuary Ark and etched in glass on either side of the Ark in the Chapel. The Third Commandment, of course, prohibits making any graven image that depicts God. The cloud and pillar of the pillar of fire, though, are metaphors for the Divine Presence.

We read in this week's portion, "On the day that the Tabernacle was erected, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, ... and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning."ⁱ We also learn that the cloud guided the Israelites in the desert: When it stayed put, the Israelites remained in camp. When the cloud moved, the Israelites followed.ⁱⁱ

Our sages resist imagining that the cloud is God, or even the presence of God, which would violate that injunction against physical depictions of the Divine. Instead, they emphasize that God sends the cloud as a sign that God always provides what we need.ⁱⁱⁱ A cloud would offer shade during the hot, sun-scorched desert day, while the pillar of fire would extend light and warmth on cold, dark nights in the wilderness. For a people wandering with no GPS, the cloud's movements lend direction to their journey.

Tonight, we celebrate the presidency of Carol Pfeifer Parham, two full years of leadership when God has granted Congregation B'nai Israel the gift of a cloud to shelter us, a fire to keep the light burning, and a clear sense of direction.

Carol has been the cloud, shielding our congregation from the heat. Indeed, two potential threats to congregational health are ever at the forefront of Carol's mind: physical security and financial stability.

With her lay leadership partners and Eileen Hamilton, not to mention generous donors, Carol has shielded us from concern about personal well-being at the Temple. She backed Eileen's transition to Little Rock Police Department off-duty officers, who have been most responsive to our needs. And Carol grew our security presence from Friday nights, Sunday mornings, and holy days to include

Shabbat mornings as well, safeguarding members and guests whenever we gather here for worship, study, and celebration.

Of course, physical protection has become a paramount duty of all institutional leaders during the coronavirus crisis. Carol never signed up to be President during a global pandemic! In a way, though, a covenant of Temple leadership is like a marriage vow: “in sickness and in health.” Carol has repeatedly stepped forward, spreading a protective cloud over our congregational family, by devising, encouraging and supporting the legion safety measures that we’ve taken in this difficult time. None of that has been easy for Carol. She has often lamented, “I miss being with everybody.” Still, she has never wavered: Our health and protecting lives have come first. Always.

Carol did come into Temple leadership mindful of the trust of financial stewardship that would be placed in her hands. Tonight, Carol will be blessed by her father, who served as President himself, mindful that she is the fifth generation of Temple leaders in her family, stretching back to our congregation’s founding in 1866. Carol is grateful for the gifts of generations past that provide vital resources to enrich Jewish life in the congregation’s present and future. She has spread a cloud of protection over those legacy funds, which means both that the appropriate portion is utilized for the purposes intended and that the corpus of each fund is preserved for the next generation. This stewardship has brought new generosity to the Temple during Carol’s presidency, a powerful legacy for the future.

“A pillar of fire” does not, on the face, seem to be an apt description of our President. Indeed, as I wrote in the *Chronicle*, she has often calmed and balanced my own fiery passions. But that pillar of fire does not burn up the Children of Israel. It warms them, and it guides them through darkness, both of which are fitting metaphors for Carol’s leadership.

Inevitably, Temple life, like that in all institutions, involves conflict from time to time. Carol is a peacemaker, bringing warmth into a cold room, time and again.

Even more important, when we face dark times—in our personal lives or in the life of our city, state, and nation, and here I’m not talking only about 2020—Carol has been there. Compassion is her guiding light. She cares about the personal well-being of each member of our congregation and its staff, and she transforms her empathy into action. My family and I have felt the warmth of Carol’s presence in difficult moments as a source of comfort, and I know we are far from alone.

Torah tells us that the cloud would often rest above the camp for an extended period of time. The Israelites were enjoined to stay put until the cloud moved, signaling the next step on the journey.

I have often noted that I am tempted to move more quickly than Carol—indeed, more quickly than may be healthy for me or for the congregation. Carol has served as a much-needed balance—resting over the camp, if you will, for a period of time, before thoughtful consideration leads her to the conclusion that the time has come to set out on a new journey.

Still, like the cloud sent by God, Carol has repeatedly moved, resolutely and in a way that provides confidence to the community, to take important steps forward. Carol was the driving force behind a collaborate effort to offer our staff a group health insurance plan for the first time in the congregation’s history. She cemented Eileen Hamilton’s vital role as our Director of Administration, Education, and Youth Engagement. And let us also acknowledge that steps forward, taken under Carol’s leadership during this tragic pandemic, will transform Congregation B’nai Israel into the future. While we all look forward to the day when we can gather in his Sanctuary in person in large numbers once again, we may also mark March 13, 2020 as the first time that we offered the opportunity to bring this Sanctuary into congregants’ and friends’ homes via livestream, a service certain to remain available even in a post-pandemic era.

In a few moments, Art will bless Carol at the Ark, while I offer the Torah’s words of blessing from a physical distance. The moment is powerful, signifying the unparalleled legacy of congregational leadership in the Pfeifer family. Let it also be a signal of the transmission of that heritage into the future. Let future generations of Temple leaders—in Carol’s footsteps, beginning with Amanda Ferguson in the days ahead—ever shield Congregation B’nai Israel from the blistering effects of the sun, ever shine light and warmth in the darkness, and always guide us in paths of righteousness.

Amen.

ⁱ Numbers 9:15.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 9:17-23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note the insistence in Siftei Chakhamim, Numbers 9:17:1, that the cloud does not rise, but “was lifted.”