

Summer 2012 D'verei Torah By Jewish Center Congregants

The Jewish Center Princeton, NJ

Once again this summer, our bimah was graced by the presence of our congregants who diligently prepared and presented a D'var Torah on seven Shabbatot. We're fortunate to be in a congregation with so many talented members who are capable of and willing to give up some of their summer relaxation time to enlighten us. We also thank Joe Schwartz and Bernard Abramson who coordinate this program and recruited the presenters.

Parasha Balak (17 Tamuz/July 7) Eve Coulson

If there are any weeks when the words of the Torah are unambiguous and the message is immediately clear---this isn't one of those weeks! Today's story offers us improbable characters, false starts, seemingly mixed messages from God, and strong indicators that the writing itself is the product of two sources. Fighting back self doubt, and knowing that though this is the first time I have tried to wrestle meaning from this text, and at least some of you have already done so, I anchored myself and my remarks today with two ideas that are integral to the story and that have deep meaning for me. Eventually everything I read led me to these two intertwined ideas-- the value and importance of speaking the truth, and very often, the difficulties we run into trying to determine what the truth is.

This story is complicated, at times confusing, full of contradictions, and inconsistencies, but the message I take from it is ultimately simple and clear. It may be that the story is written in the chaotic, back and forth way that it is to emphasize the struggle inherent in locating and speaking the truth. As we have heard, Balak, leader of the Moabites, feels threatened by the large gathering of Israelites and asks the prophet Balaam to curse them in hopes of being able to prevail against them. Funny, at least as a modern Jew, to see it from his point of view, that the assembled Israelites appeared massive and overwhelming. Balaam agrees to consider the request but insists on turning to God for guidance, who tells him, at first clearly, to "bless them, don't curse them".

Balaam must contend with a leader eager to hear a different answer than he is getting, so eager that he sends increasingly impressive delegations of dignitaries, and promises of wealth to persuade him. An invisible angel threatens, a donkey who

can see what Balaam can't, and eventually begins to talk about it too, protects Balaam while causing his foot to be crushed. Altars are built, sacrifices are made, but the final result, is not merely neutral but the opposite of what Balak hoped for. Over and over again, Balaam recognizes the Israelites as a people to be blessed. Sticking with this story was not easy.

There are often distractions and contradictions to obvious truths, and Balaam has to deal with these externals as well consider and understand what God is telling him.

Echoing this reality, yesterday Rabbi Feldman wrote from Jerusalem that by being at a distance on July 4th this year he was in a better position to see and appreciate what is good and important about this country, which might have been obscured by traffic, heat, fireworks and barbeques attended. The obvious parallel he noted is that Balaam stood at a distance when the words of Mah Tovv came to him, rather than the curse Balak wanted to hear.

The recent response to Nora Ephron's life and death are strong evidence that it matters to us when someone articulates the truth. I noticed this in every story I read about her writing and her films. Like many of us I was even more affected by her work than I had realized. I found pages of quotes from her books and films, funny, and full of modern yet eternal truths. It was impossible to pick the best one, but here is one that I hadn't seen before:

"Here are some questions I am constantly noodling over: Do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live every day as if it's your last, or do you save your money on the chance you'll live twenty more years? Is life too short, or is it going to be too long? Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses? And where do carbohydrates fit into all this? Are we really all going to spend our last years avoiding bread, especially now that bread in American is so unbelievable delicious? And what about chocolate?" (— Nora Ephron, *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*)

Nora' Ephron's mother Phoebe, a writer as well, once said to her, "Take notes. Nora, take notes. Everything is copy". That rang true for me, because in these past several weeks, with preparation for this D'var Torah on my mind, I found that what I was thinking about attached itself to what was happening in my everyday life.

One particular event stands out. Shortly after Bernard Abramson asked to me speak at services I learned that a friend of over 40 years, was ill beyond any possible good outcome, in hospice near his home in Summit, that it was now a matter of time before the various ailments took him. I won't try to do the friendship justice here, you may have a friend like this, unique, irreplaceable, not that you are always in touch, but absolutely a part of your life for keeps.

I have visited him several times, most recently this past Thursday. The first time, about two weeks ago, I wondered what to say, and how to say it. What was the truest, clearest message I had? Was it goodbye? Was it to produce a list of all his

good qualities and memories and what he had meant to me? Or should that be in the present tense? Is talk of everyday things he won't be part of anymore pleasant, reassuring, or utterly meaningless, hurtful and annoying? How to speak in a way true to past conversations, but reflecting the current reality of his terminal illness? I had no idea. Oh, I had some ideas, I just wasn't entirely sure they were the right ones. I just hoped not to say something stupid. I guess I had a couple of other thoughts. As I drove there it became massively important to me to say something, and hopefully something that struck a chord. I might not have another chance. (Among other things, I did manage to thank him for believing in me, something I've never thought to say to anyone, which made me cry, and which was absolutely the truth)

This past Thursday, even going back a week ago, he was beyond being able to speak. I wasn't entirely sure he knew it was me but I AM convinced he knew someone familiar, caring was there. I looked at him at one point and said, "This isn't much of a conversation, is it?but still, I'm so grateful for all the conversations we've every had." He squeezed my hand right then. I'm pretty sure he understood, and that I said what I needed to say.

The challenge we all face to be clear about what's true and say it in our lives may not seem as momentous as the fate of the Jewish people, cursed or blessed. Nonetheless, we reach for the right combination of word that will hit the mark when talking to our children, our parents, our neighbors and our friends. When interviewing for a job, when arguing a case, or dealing with a client or a colleague. When we get it right sometimes we know it, but not always.

Much like Balaam, I read this parasha with a sense early on of what I needed to say, but I had to go through a lot to stay with that first feeling. What saved me from feeling completely over my head may have been the fact that I majored in philosophy, where questions without answers are familiar territory. I was also grateful that I heard Rabbi Tucker say last week, "when you have so many interpretations of one thing, you realize, no one has a clue."

So, in the great tradition of Torah study I was left with some puzzling questions:

Why hire a prophet to be a spokesperson? Didn't people look to prophets to tell them what's so?

Why wasn't God more clear? Was it a test?

Why did God allow Balaam to travel with Balak's emissaries and then send an angel to stop him? Why didn't God just tell him directly? Why couldn't Balaam see the angel?

The talking donkey, though certainly a humorous image – one has to wonder why was it specifically cast as a female, and given that, why she had a role that had impact on the course of events?

How do we understand the two main characters, not Jews, relating to God in a way very familiar to us? Is this God the same as our God? It seems unusual to have a story, particularly about an effort to jeopardize the Israelites told from the outsider's point of view. What's particularly odd to me is that its not really told with an emphasis on this fact, as in, "We are now going behind enemy lines to listen in". How did this story even make it into the Torah? Why would it become the vehicle for delivering two important and memorable lines---that it falls to outsiders to observe our goodly tents and our destiny to dwell apart? I hope I show my curiosity more than my ignorance here.

The first of these powerful and well-known lines is:

"There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among nations" This deals with two realities of the Jewish people—being seen as the other and the whole spectrum of persecution, anti Semitism and destruction that has occurred, which is certainly in the mix in this story. The other meaning, that the Jewish people are somehow uniquely holy and have a certain mission to seek truth and wisdom—this too is a part of today's story, represented by Balaam's chaotic and determined search for the correct response to Balak's request that he curse the Israelites.

The second line, which we recite so often, is Mah Tov

(ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael...)

How beautiful are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel."

When I read this I think of how many times we have gathered here, in large numbers and in small, in the dark days of winter or the predicted 100 degree heat of today, and I am convinced that each time, something important happens, for many of us privately and individually, but often also as a shared experience. That we come together and in doing so some truths emerge, about the stories we read as well as what meaning we make of our personal lives. We find it in reading the text, in our own separate quiet time, listening, praying, reflecting, witnessing important moments in the lives of others, talking with someone at lunch.

Was there a right answer today, a best possible interpretation of today's parasha? Of course, I wrestled with that too.

What I do know for sure is that I am grateful for this tent and all who come here, because by being here we can stand together when things are not clear and often, knowingly or not, provide each other opportunities to know and to say what ultimately is as close to truth as we can manage.

Parasha Pinchas (24 Tamuz/July 14)
Harold Heft

Shabbat Shalom

It has been six years since I last graced this *bima* to offer a *D'var Torah* and I am honored and astonished to be invited once again.

I have been instructed by the Religious Affairs Committee - as have all of the other guest speakers this summer - to shun controversy and perhaps find a personal connection in today's *parashah*.

But *Pinchas* sure doesn't make it easy to avoid controversy – it is a minefield with plenty of opportunities to weigh in on contentious issues.

Right off the bat, Pinchas has just speared Zimri and his foreign mistress through their kishkes for breaking God's Law and he has been rewarded by God with lifelong friendship and a priesthood for him and his descendants . There's a fine volatile mix of zealotry, fundamentalism, and nationalism to work with - and it's Bastille Day *nach!* - ...so gotta scratch that..

Next we have the riveting account of the new census, including the assignment of land to each of the tribes. That provides me an opportunity to consider the validity of historical claims to the Land of Israel...umm...better scratch that, too...

Oh - we have the daughters of Zelophedad pleading with Moses to be granted a landholding because their father had left no sons. Lot of ways I could go with that story. Feminism and Jewish tradition? Justice vs. law? I know I could find a way to segue to an Obamacare discussion in there somewhere...soooo...gotta skip that..

And we finish the *parashah* with the mesmerizing litany of offerings due to God throughout the year: 543 assorted lambs, goats, rams, and bulls per annum . Well, maybe there's less fodder here for controversy, unless some of you are in the pro-sacrifice camp and are ready to face off against vegans or PETA...sooo...that's out of bounds, too...

* * * *

But all is not lost..

As I read through Pinchas in preparation for this *D'var Torah*, I was particularly drawn to the twelve remarkable verses describing - for the first time in the *Chumash* - the impending transition of power from Moses to Joshua.

We didn't read this short passage this morning – it 's on a different segment of the triennial cycle - so please permit me paraphrase it for you:

God tells Moses to climb the heights of Abarim and view the Land of Israel, saying that once he has seen it, he will die without entering the land, because he disobeyed God's command in the wilderness of Zin.

Moses then asks God to appoint someone over the community, so that the Israelites will not be like sheep without a shepherd after he is dead.

God tells Moses to single out Joshua, lay his hand on him, and commission him before Eleazar the priest - and the whole community.

Moses takes Joshua to the priest to confirm him and then he presents Joshua to the whole community, commissioning him as his successor - and the new Israelite leader. (Numbers 27:12-23.)

In this concise and striking passage, we first learn that:

Moses' time as the Israelite leader is up.

Moses is stepping down.

Moses has to let everyone know he is stepping down and present them with the new boss.

Moses has to manage Joshua's taking over the reins of leadership and...

Moses does not get to see how it will all turn out.

Now that is something personal that I can relate to...

Because - you see - I am retiring in a few months myself and - while I certainly would not characterize my transition as biblical in proportion nor would I compare myself to *Moshe Rabbenu* in any way (beards, maybe?) - the unfolding of events in my life is somewhat parallel:

My long tenure of running a business is just about up.

I am stepping down.

I need to identify my successor, hire and train him or her, and manage the company's transition to the new boss and...

Because I will be relinquishing all decision-making and fiduciary responsibilities - I don't get to affect how it all turns out...I may see how it turns out for a while if I pay attention, but really - I am done at the end of the year...

* * * *

As I studied these verses concerning Moses' transfer of power to Joshua - and as I did some research on-line to maybe crib a few good ideas for this *D'var Torah* - I found myself confounded by what is not in the story and what is largely ignored in the traditional and modern commentaries.

Yes, the rabbis and sages *kvell* endlessly about Moses' altruism and ethics:

They muse that after the census, perhaps Moses was hopeful that God would rescind His decree and allow him to accompany the people into the Promised Land.

But once God disabuses him of that notion: "*you will see the land, but you will not enter it*", Moses immediately and selflessly asks God to provide the people with a new leader.

The Rabbis also ponder whether Moses hoped God would designate his son as his successor, reasoning that since the priesthood was inherited, maybe his own position would be as well..

But God chooses Joshua.

And again Moses follows what God tells him without any objection, putting the welfare of the people first and his personal needs last.

"What an example of ethical leadership!", say the sages.

"What an example for today's leaders!", say the modern talking heads .

Further, there is plenty of discussion about Joshua's preparation by God and Moses for succession,

And much is said about how the new Israelite community needed a change in leadership styles - paradigm change - if you will - or "meet the new boss, NOT the same as the old boss...".

Indeed, modern management consultants and religious institutions electing or hiring new leaders find jewels of wisdom in these events to inform their own leadership succession projects.

* * * *

Well, I am stepping through a similar succession process:

I am recruiting, hiring, training, transitioning.

And I think I am acting responsibly, keeping in mind my obligations - be they ethical or contractual - to all of the relevant stakeholders: the owners and employees, our customers and suppliers, my friends and my family.

But - something fundamental is missing from this picture.

Neither the *parashah* at hand nor the management gurus offer much in any way of consideration of the profound emotions that accompany one's giving up the mantle of leadership.

What is absent or elided from the account in Pinchas is Moses' humanity.

We have his selfless heroism on display, but how did he feel about his impending retirement and death? Moses was clearly a man of powerful emotions - we witness his doubt and his rage countless times in *Torah*.

But not here, not when his job is over, not when his goal is put out of reach, not when his death is imminent.

If Moses was angry or bitter about God's decisions, the *Torah* is silent.

If Moses was distressed about abandoning his personal desires, if he was depressed - or relieved - about surrendering his command... we just can't tell.

But I think I know how Moses was feeling ... because my own transition echoes his...and I definitely have strong feelings about what is happening...

* * * *

Now I am retiring...I am not being retired.

And my death - unlike Moses' - isn't imminent, as far as I know - so there are some differences.

But Moses was a man and I am a man - and the Exodus saga can say nothing to us unless we admit to the common humanity we share with Moses and the Israelites arcing over the centuries, whether one believes they really lived or whether one considers their history as iconic.

We must uncover and embrace their humanity as our own, *l'dor vador*, across generations, if we are to find meaning in their story and illuminate our own lives.

When I reach out to the man living in these twelve verses, I know that Moses must have felt conflicted about stepping down and letting go, because I sure do.

There is one *midrash* where the sages do comment on how difficult it must have been for Moses to relinquish command. In *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, Moses is compared to a "governor who ... as soon as he retired and another was appointed in his place ... asked the gate-keeper to let him enter [the palace] - in vain."

I know that feeling all too well - I, too, feel like a lame duck.

Since I announced my intention to retire, I am no longer included in meetings that I might otherwise have been part of or even led - and it is both freeing and disconcerting. - I welcome it and I resent it, too.

Strategies are mulled over without me.

Policies are established or revised without my input.

Projects I initiated won't be completed until after I retire - should I care about the outcomes?

Projects assigned by me to others won't bear fruit until after I am gone - what effort should I invest in those tasks?

I occasionally find it difficult to concentrate on my work.

I worry how I can maintain focus - how I can operate effectively and constructively with these emotions through year-end.

And - I am confronted once again with the truth that power is alluring and difficult to abandon. As one *midrash* states, "It is easy to go up to a dais, difficult to come down." (*Yalkut, Va'etchanan 845*)

Another rabbi said: "All my life I would run away from office. Now that I have entered it, whoever comes to oust me, I will come down upon him with this kettle." (Jerusalem *Talmud, Pesachim 6:1*; also see *Menahot 109b*).

And - despite my desire to move on, there is the inertia of repetition and the comfort of doing what I know well and what I am pretty good at.

I have to believe that Moses experienced much the same as he approached the end of his life and life project - even if he didn't act on it.

Maybe whoever compiled these verses wanted to make a theological example of Moses' extraordinary devotion to God and his people - and purposely left out his simple humanity.

Or maybe there is a dearth of emotional content in *Pinchas* simply because Moses knew he didn't have much time left - too much to do in the last few hours - Joshua to

train, tribes to admonish, songs to sing...not much opportunity to act out, and Moses was - above all - a responsible leader.

We do see Moses' selfless carrying out of the transition of power, we see also his uncompromising focus on the future, on the needs of the community, at the expense of personal glory.

I wouldn't put myself in that league, of course, although I am trying to do what is best for the future survival of the company I am leaving.

But I have also been focusing on my personal future, something that Moses didn't have going for him.

Despite the great sense of loss I feel at times in giving up my job, I am eager to do some other things I really, really want to do and I am excited about the prospect of less stress in my life.

The trade-offs seem like they will be worth it.

Unlike Moses, I get to cross that river and I have plenty to do on the other side: more time to volunteer, more time to write and paint, more time with friends and family.

It is a journey to the Promised Land of a different sort, I guess.

Shabbat Shalom....

Parasha Matot-Masei (2 Av/July 21)
Karen Ohringer-Echeverria

You may be an ambassador to England or France; you may like to gamble; you might like to dance; you may be the heavyweight champion of the world; you may be a socialite with a long string of pearls; but you will have to serve somebody. Yes, indeed you will have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you will have to serve somebody.

My 81-year-old mother, still able to identify every current pop song and vocalist on the current Top Ten List – even faster than my 19 year old twins - finds a particularly SPECIAL place in her heart for this, the last HIT Bob Dylan wrote and recorded in 1979. For my mother it is a way to describe the “great equalizer” in life. She is always ready with the refrain when I relate a story of comeuppance.

You may describe the parshiot Mattot-Masei in these terms - the “great equalizer.” It is not just women but also men who are commanded; really subordinated by G-d. Women’s vows may be qualified by their male counterparts depending on age and marital status. In *Numbers 30:9*, “But if her husband restrains her on the day that he learns of it, he thereby annuls her vow which was in force or the commitment to which she bound herself; and the Lord will forgive her.” Now consider, however *32:23*, as Moses informs the Gadites and the Reubenites if they do not do as the Lord commands their sin will overtake them. Men are commanded to commit murder, really genocide - pretty grim! Both men and women are subject to a higher authority in these parshiot. After reading them we are somehow left ashamed and searching for the moral, if there is any, to the murder, mayhem and sexism. If this was a mashal, a parable that my children would come home to share with me when they attended Abrams Hebrew Academy, I wouldn’t even want to ask them what the nimshal or moral would be. My mother would say, “Well, you know the refrain.”

What should we cull from these commands from G-d. Well, obviously, although we must suffer through certain unpleasant events in our lives, words have power beyond their sound. Words turn things on their heads, set them straight, save the world, start a war, end one. Tremendous power *the* word. As I grapple with one of the disturbing chapters of the Torah, I am met with the horrible events of this week. The death of the Israeli tourists in Bulgaria and the frightening and sickening massacre in Colorado. I do as I always do best, embrace the entropy. As the Mayor of Aurora, CO poignantly remarked during yesterday’s press conference, “This is tragic and horrible but isolated. So we must talk about it and get through it.” Life happens and everything is fraught with compromise and sometimes calamity. As Mattot points out one can choose to accept the terms or not. There are consequences to both. Everything is conditional and subject to context and time. If words are the order of the day perhaps I could focus on the Hebrew word *Shalem*. It means whole. I could frame this parasha as a PART of the whole, the awful part. Perhaps, it will help us to face all the messiness and grapple with it. If life were a mashal we would be forced into an unwelcome self-understanding. This is difficult to swallow and yet

extremely cathartic. More importantly, it could be the impetus to “be the change you want to see in the world” as Ghandi eloquently stated.

In a recent *Atlantic* magazine article, Anne Marie Slaughter, a Princeton resident and academic speaks of her time as the first woman Director of Policy Planning at the State Department. She shares the complications that arise when she ultimately realizes that motherhood for her needed to become a daily hands-on job that her bi-city lifestyle could no longer support. Through this complication she sees all too clearly that unless women change the paradigm of the work-life balance, it will not be changed. Her new gender gap is measured by wellbeing, not wages. For the first time Ms. Slaughter finds herself on the other side of the “I can have it all” debate. Her idea is to change the system not to sacrifice one part of her life in order to excel at another. Even those who have risen to the top of their profession are starting to admit that in order to change things for the better they have to admit the flaws and limitations in order to come to terms with them.

Everyday we read a headline about women objecting to and rewriting the rules. This week alone we discover Marissa Mayer who in her eighth month of pregnancy was hired as CEO at Yahoo. Nur Surani Mohamed Taibi, a Malaysian sharpshooter, will most likely be eight months pregnant while competing in the upcoming London Summer Olympics next week. No longer do we look at pregnancy as a pre-existing medical condition.

The late Nora Ephron was a master at examining life in its glorious disorder. She developed a career of writing that celebrated her flaws and the flaws of her characters. This encouraged all of us with less than perfect lives that perhaps there would be another chance for us to succeed. She would share that her mother would often remind her of “the tragedies of her life one day, would always have the potential to become the comic stories, the next.” In a 1996 speech to the graduating class at Wellesley College, her alma mater, she advised, “Above all be the heroine of your life not the victim” giving a nod to life’s serendipity.

As I am continuously reminded when I watch *Mad Men*, growing up in the 50s and 60s was certainly challenging and messy for women in Judaism and in life in general. Yet, when I read Torah on the bima, when my daughters and I are counted in a minyan, when I go to Home Depot and Dave from Lighting says to me, “Does your husband know you saved him \$50,000 this year by doing all these projects and repairs yourself? (Well, more like \$10,000 this year.) I feel all the roadblocks and barriers I faced in life as a person, regardless of the reason, have just made me more determined to change the things that need to be changed.

According to the Talmud silence is like assent. Ironically, this was actually formulated to discuss the annulment of women’s vows in this parasha. I use it to guide my life, to make problems into projects, and to wake up every day and utter my morning gratitude. Thank you G-d for granting me another day to get it right because I **certainly didn’t get it right yesterday.**

Parasha Vaetchanan (16 Av/August 4)
Phil Carchman

The premise of A.J. Jacobs inventive and amusing book, The Year of Living Biblically, is to spend one year living "the ultimate biblical life." Raised as a self-described secular Jew, his goal is to follow the Bible as literally as possible, obey the Ten Commandments and to abide by the many, as he characterizes them, "rules," as he can discern from the text. He has surprising, if not conventional, success with large numbers of the over 600 mitzvot even complying with the mandate of stoning an adulterer (albeit with pebbles on a bench in Central Park, while at the same time placing his own safety in jeopardy.)

In describing his year, he alludes to the "rule" that requires the binding of words as a sign on his hand and a symbol on his forehead. To meet this obligation, Jacobs has taken to the practice of binding himself but not in a way that we might recognize as familiar. Here is his description:

I take two xeroxed copies of the Ten Commandments and fold each to the size of a Polaroid photo. Every morning I tie one around my wrist with a white string, the other around my head. It's been remarkably effective. Just try forgetting about the word of God when it's right in front of your eyeballs, obscuring a chunk of your view. Sometimes I imagine the commandments sinking through my skin and going straight to my brain like some sort of holy nicotine patch. If you look really closely, "Thou shalt not steal" is branded somewhere on my frontal lobe.

Even after I take off the string for the day (usually at about noon), I still have red indentations on my hand and head for hours afterward. So in that sense, my binding feels good, righteous. But lately, my daily binding has also been tinged with guilt. I feel a tug from my ancestors or conscience or God that maybe now is the time to try the traditional Jewish method of binding the commandments to my arm and forehead: I should try and wrap tefillin.

Jacobs later informs us, the prescription for binding to your hand and between your eyes is found in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6 verse 8. And that brings us to this weeks parasha – Vaetchanan.

One of the true pleasures of participating in The Jewish Center's summer program is that it forces me to read the entire parasha, although I seem to over focus on Deuteronomy, and as I have said before, I never cease to be amazed at the abundance of diverse, interesting and even provocative subjects found in each parasha with virtually every line providing the equally diverse, interesting and sometimes provocative interpretations that we read and hear from week to week and year to year.

What makes Vaetchanan so special is that it is, as characterized by Rabbi Dovid Green - Judaism 101. Within its four corners, in Moses' voice, we find the Shema and the Ten Commandments as well as passage after passage that are integral parts of both our daily and Shabbat prayers.

It is a particularly rich parasha filled with the language that generates pages and reams of interpretation and analysis. And yet, as I pondered the question – What do **I** talk about? – I thought of Jacob's yearlong journey (AJ Jacobs not our biblical patriarch) and focused on a mitzvah that we reference every day in our Jewish lives - that the words shall be “a sign upon your hand and frontlets between your eyes.” And this brings us to the remarkable ritual practice of donning tefillin.

This injunction appears four places in the Bible, twice in Exodus and twice in Deuteronomy, each time in relatively close textual proximity and each time described with a slight variations in the text. Historically, the ritual of tefillin is an ancient tradition dating back to at least the first century of the common era and evidence of tefillin was found at Qumran (see Dead Sea Scrolls) again from that period. As an aside, although we think of the donning of tefillin by women as a modern egalitarian convention, this is not accurate as there are ancient writings describing tefillin being worn by women as well as men.

What is it that draws us to participate in the unique ritual of "laying tefillin?"

Many have pondered the question but we need go no further then our own congregation to gain insight and provide a snapshot glimpse of an answer, for in 1993, one of our congregants, Linda Milstein, while a graduate student, conducted research to answer this very question resulting in a paper entitled "Wearing Tefillin: Individual Acts, Multiple Meanings." The lab rats in this 13-week study were 9 regular attendees of our Sunday and Wednesday minyan, (eight men and one woman). (Full disclosure requires that I confirm that I was part of the study). Linda's work focused on the use of ritual garb and specifically the fulfillment of the mitzvah of donning the tefillin.

The results of the study were fascinating. The majority of the subjects had learned about tefillin in connection with their bar mitzvah training and most had received their tefillin from a father or grandfather. In fact, one of the reasons expressed for continuing the tradition was “a strong feeling of continuity with a father or grandfather.” For all, the physical objects were invested with emotional content – a critical part of the experience.

Those who wore tefillin expressed a common commitment to the ritual that was based on the meaning of tefillin for them as adults, and yet all of us had abandoned the use of tefillin at some earlier point in our lives.

Another common theme was the desire to experience a greater degree of personal spirituality during prayer. As one participant described it:

Putting on tefillin is a very physical action. I was astonished to feel the power of that action. The tefillin have the quality of placing me in a particular mood, of preparing me for a particular action. It is quite clearly in the classic sense, an act of kavanah or intention.

Others described it as a point of focus and others observed that it reflected an extra effort demonstrating more attention to what you are saying. Yet another reflected on a reaffirmation of the importance generally of performing a mitzvah. In sum, it was for all both a physical and spiritual act.

For me, personally, the act of donning tefillin represented yet another step in a continuum. I would like to take a brief moment to share my experience with you.

I, too, was introduced to tefillin immediately following my Bar Mitzvah and after an enthusiastic ten days of use, they never again saw the light of day. In 1993, following my father's death, I committed to a year of attending a daily minyan to say Kaddish. This came as something of a surprise to my family as I was, at best, a very occasional attendee at Shabbat services. And in some ways, I was unable to fully understand my chosen commitment. The most reliable and convenient regular minyan for me was in Trenton, in that city's last remaining Orthodox congregation. Four days a week, I would make the 6:30 a.m. trek to a small building on State Street where as the youngest participant by at least a generation and a half, I was quickly adopted by the congregational elders who welcomed me warmly as a participant - many times because I was in fact the tenth to arrive. A young Orthodox Rabbi from Philadelphia davened on Monday and Thursdays.

Within a few weeks of my attending the minyan, the Rabbi approached me, and in the gentlest of ways inquired if I would like to put on tefillin. I answered that I was not there yet or ready to do so, but after a few months, and with spare set provided by my brother-in-law, I apprehensively agreed.

The effect was profound. I was wearing my late father's tallis complemented with my gifted tefillin and I was now a full participant in this daily minyan. Many of the feelings expressed by others in the study paralleled my feelings.

The impact of that decision was shared on the other two weekdays - Sunday and Wednesday, when I came here and became part of the Jewish Center's weekday minyan. By 1993, I had been a member of this congregation for more than three decades; however, I had never once attended the midweek minyan.

Now here I was enshrouded in the familiar tallis and kippah but also because of these unique bindings involved with, as Linda concluded in her study, "a concrete physicality and a transcendent meaning . . . to create an intense personal experience because of having chosen to wear them."

And there was more. Of course, my stated purpose in participating in the minyan was to say Kaddish, so the minyan became my community to ensure the fulfillment of my objective. I needed the other nine participants, and their spirits were raised just knowing that their presence helped me and the others that joined us.

But I soon discovered that there was another sub-community as well. The tefillin wearers! Nothing formal, mind you - no officers, dues, minutes or Roberts Rules of Order, just a group of congregants assembled around the rear table in the Bet Midrash at the conclusion of the weekday service, removing our tefillin and sharing thoughts on anything of interest ranging from religion, politics, sports, travel or anything else that came to mind. No one was excluded, in fact new participants were welcomed, even those who did not choose to engage in the ritual.

Another participant in the study identified the same phenomenon. He said:

It's a part of coming to the minyan when it's very pleasant There is a sense of togetherness. A community is a group of people who talks together. [Those who don't wear tefillin] are welcome [as well]. You come up to the table to talk or listen.

I can attest that 19-years post-study, there is still a sense of commitment and community that all feel. The only thing that has changed is positive as more and more women now wear tefillin. And more than ever the now famous table still serves as our gathering place.

For so many of us, our daily lives are filled with a routine of either our work, study or whatever else we choose to fill our day. The act of donning tefillin is different.

Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffman relates the story of his Rabbi who asked a doctor about the success rate of a particular surgical procedure.

“Rabbi,” said the doctor, “I’ve done this procedure so many times, I could do it with my eyes closed.” After the doctor left, the Rabbi turned to his son and said: “Believe me; I’ve donned my tefillin far more times than that the doctor has performed this operation, yet, I could not do it with my eyes closed! To the contrary – every day when I take out my tefillin, I try to don them with the same excitement and anticipation I had the very first time I put them on.

Rabbi Hoffmann informs us that he watched the Rabbi put on his tefillin day after day, and every day, the Rabbi did so with the freshness and pure anticipation of one who was doing so for the first time.

We eschew “payoffs” when fulfilling our obligations of performing mitzvot – but what a return on this investment. A simple act rewards us with personal – spiritual

– and physical satisfaction and fulfills a mitzvah that we have known forever and is uniquely Jewish. But truly, we do not even require that much.

Rabbi Tuvia Bolton tells the story of a group of Rabbis who were permitted to enter an Israeli war zone to assist the soldiers. One of their first efforts was to make tefillin available. Some soldiers accepted but one soldier adamantly refused in a particularly offensive way, cursing and insulting the Rabbi and pushing him away.

A short distance away another soldier beckoned the Rabbi. He asked the Rabbi if by putting on the tefillin, God would protect him. The Rabbi responded and said, "God will protect you whether you put on the tefillin or not. He loves you because you are a Jew. But if God protects you for free, why not do something for free and put on the tefillin."

Just then, the soldier who had abusively refused earlier called the Rabbi and motioned him over.

"What do you want?" asked the Rabbi. "What happened?"

"None of your business," answered the soldier, "but I want to put on the tefillin."

"Are you for real?" reacted the Rabbi.

"Listen my friend," said the soldier, "To put on tefillin to go to heaven or to be religious, that is not for me. But to put on the tefillin for no reason, that is what I am willing to do."

As the Rabbi concluded, this is the essence of the Jewish soul. We may reject all reasons, all explanations. No one need ask questions or why. Just embracing the mitzvah is enough.

And our good friend Mr. Jacobs. He describes putting on tefillin for the first time as akin to having his blood pressure taken or perhaps being swaddled by god or even connecting with his father's father. He closes by saying:

It did not send me into the mystical trance that I seek, but it was far more moving than I thought it would be. As strange as the ritual is, it also has beauty.

Tomorrow morning at 8:30 a.m., we welcome you all to join us as we again will gather around the table in the Bet Midrash; bring to it and take away from it whatever you like, no questions asked, no reasons required, but know that you will be a part of a community and ancient tradition, fulfilling the mitzvah tucked away in this week's parasha - Vaetchanan.

Shabbat Shalom

Parasha Eikev (23 Av/August 11)
Paget Berger

Rabbi, Cantor, and fellow Congregants. Thank you for the opportunity to share words of Torah with you this morning, and thank you for the privilege of speaking on JCW Shabbat.

There are clearly many satisfying reasons to study, and to work at unlocking the meaning of Torah. When studying Devarim, Deuteronomy, we are presented with, as Robert Alter expresses it, a rhetorical enterprise, which is Moshe's valedictory address. Alter emphasizes that Moses is "reminding people that their very lives and collective survival depends on punctilious observance of this teaching, the Torah." One guesses that Moses hoped to convey a great sense of urgency, of import in his message, owing to his limited time, and the people's expectations regarding the Promised Land. Today's Parsha, Eikev, occupies prime place in the valedictory address. It is a recitative with references to the law, the story of the People's wandering in the wilderness, and Moses's admonishment to Israel to be loyal to God and follow all His commandments, if they wished to enjoy the fruits of the land....He deliberately warns the people not to be arrogant or to attribute God's work to themselves, lest they lose the benefits of the land of milk and honey, and implicitly, of being God's chosen people.

Our quest this morning is to bring our own sense of urgency and relevance to this recitative linking it to the current day, and our 21st century existence.

The centerpiece of Eikev, is sometimes called the reconciliation. As amplified in the Stone commentary, "despite the grievousness of Israel's sin, God's love remained strong, and whatever demands He made of the people were for their good, and so that He would not be deterred from showering His benefits upon them." Hence the theme of reconciliation is borne out in Eikev's clear prescription answering Moses's question, "Now O Israel, what does your God ask of you? Only to fear the Lord, your God to go in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve your God with all your heart and soul, to observe the commandments of God and His decrees, which I command you today, for your benefit."

Reading this solemn order, how shall we approach this question: "What does your God ask of you?" How shall we derive personal relevance and motivation? Perhaps we can by examining three intriguing dichotomies, or seemingly contrasting notions inherent in Eikev, all of which revolve around reconciliation and the prescription noted above.

In the first place, is our God more to be feared for the power He wields and the punishments he metes out? Or is our relationship with God more to be founded in love, reverence, and awe? Truly, what does God fearing mean?

Second, are we as a People so prone to arrogance, or blindness, that we would risk losing all that we hold dear and our very security? Or, can we cultivate individual aspirations and a thriving community through acts of humility?

And lastly, is it especially necessary, or even possible to keep all the commandments all the time? Really? All the commandments, all the time? To what extent have we been tempted to relegate mitzvot to acts of convenience, and self-service, or merely isolated instances of ceremonial observance? At what price to ourselves? To our community?

Fear, humility, and observance, -- what can we currently glean from these in relation to the ancient and lyrical question of Eikev – “Now O Israel, what does your G-d ask of you?”

Rashi gives a keen insight into the nature of “fearing God.” To wit, “Even now, after the Golden Calf, God asks only that you fear him. Everything is in the power of Heaven, with the exception of whether a person will have fear of Heaven. Only people can develop this spiritual quality in themselves.”

Even so, there are apparently higher and lower orders of fear. We can consider awe and reverence as a higher order of fearing, which may be difficult to achieve; whereas response or compliance based on fear of punishment, may be considered a lower order of the meaning of fear. Rabbi Abigail Treu writing this week’s Torah commentary for JTS, puts a finer point on exactly this question. Rabbi Treu writes about the need to resist seeing God as a parent who dictates to us, or infantilizes us with if-then scenarios, “choices that are not really choices”. She argues instead that our relationship with God has to allow for personal growth and transformation. She writes “There are times when we need a commanding God, when we need the structure of a God who enforces the rules to get us through a particularly wild stretch of life. There are other times when we feel rebellious, when we know what God would expect of us but also have a need to not do that, to stretch the limits of self and our relationship to the God we think we believe in.” In other words, we can learn to have reverence not only for God, but also for ourselves.

Put a slightly different but no less mind-grabbing way, Rabbi Schlomo Ressler states that the lesson of Eikev is for us to think about what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it, and realize how much control we always have!” Referencing reverence and observance he paradoxically notes “The more restraint we exercise the more freedom we’re expressing because we aren’t slaves to our nature.”

Which leads us exactly to the next dichotomy, namely, what’s to gain from the everyday tension between arrogance and humility? If we’re able to make choices and elect actions to fulfill what God is asking of us, where do we “moderns” garner our direction, our insight and motivation for the task? This enterprise is not for the weak or faint of heart. We’re instructed to serve God “with all our heart and soul, a phrase which is used at least three times in Deuteronomy, and correspondingly,

twice in the Shema. It seems that this concept at the very least requires us to expand our consciousness, to turn common assumptions on their head. We must attempt ways to elevate humility to a state of active grace, a state from which our understanding and the meaning we seek from life can flow, thereby providing a daily antidote to arrogance. We must acknowledge the warning Moses so imploringly gives in Eikev : not to forget, in other words, not to act blindly, or give in to one's nature, not to be arrogant. A state of grace is defined as having generosity of spirit, capacity to tolerate, accommodate and forgive. The Sages say that "not to thank God is like stealing from God." With aspirations of grace and active humility comes responsibility.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubovitcher Rebbe, spoke of responsibility as a "basic human need just like food or oxygen, a necessary and healthy component of our lives... Not only is your first responsibility to yourself, but independence is the greatest manifestation of human dignity." He continues, "As we are responsible for ourselves, we are responsible for the welfare of others and for society as a whole.." in other words, with our Torah inspired responsibilities, *we are very busy*. And awareness, independence and humility top the agenda. To illustrate the point, Reb Schneerson tells the following story:

"A revered rabbi once journeyed to visit a younger rabbi who was known for his religious devotion. The older rabbi was very much impressed with the young man's total immersion in prayer and study, and asked the secret of his unwavering piety. The younger man replied that by concentrating deeply on his studies, he was able to ignore any outside influences that might distract him. Indeed, the older man had noticed that many of the nearby villagers were involved in activities that were contrary to piety. He said to the younger man, when it is very cold, there are two ways to warm yourself. One is by putting on a fur coat; the other is by lighting a fire. The difference is that the fur coat warms only the person wearing it, while the fire warms anyone who comes near."

The link between personal choice, responsibility, and community surfaces continuously.

The reason arrogance is so deadly, is precisely because it can break that link. Rabbi Morris Adler cites Moses's warning that a person should not ever allow himself to believe "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" Echoing Schneerson, Adler writes that Moses is urging upon the Israelites the wisdom of gratitude and the humility that ultimately leads to responsibility. True gratitude he concludes (in an amazingly apt phrase,) always flowers in obligation. This brings up the third and final dichotomy....Let's call it the "24/7 challenge". We are used to expressing how busy we are, how wrapped up in schedules, planning for activities, describing our plans and activities to our friends, and exercising, so we can keep in shape for our activities, etc. We practice physical fitness. Some of us may even aspire to mental fitness. But how many of us make time for spiritual fitness? I would argue if we are to be more than occasional doers of selected mitzvot, we will

have to shift our paradigm regarding what Moses asks us on God's behalf, namely to observe the commandments and the decrees, "for our benefit". Ramban reminds us that it must be for our benefit, since God has the whole universe at His disposal and He does not derive personal benefit from our service."

So what benefit can we derive? Many people consider mitzvot to be in the service of, or for the benefit of others. I would argue that's a fairly narrow and limited definition. To fathom this puzzle, and tweak our thinking, we need nothing short of mindfulness. Mindfulness is commonly thought to have emanated from the Buddhist tradition of 2500 years ago. It means roughly, bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis, or paying attention in a particular way on purpose, non-judgmentally. But did you know that mindfulness has a respected interpretation and following within the Jewish community? A good starting point would be the saying of Rav Shimeon Ben Gamliel (from 70 CE). His resume lists him as a great spiritual teacher-rabbi-warrior of Jerusalem – (pretty decent role model, right?) He writes: " I have spent my life amongst sages and found nothing better for a soul than silence."

From silence, being alone with the self, we can cultivate a mindful, aware, non-judgmental and participative state for prayer and mitzvot. We can imagine a goal of living a mindful life 24/7; and we can inform this practice with prayer and mitzvot. As Estelle Frankel describes it in Sacred Therapy: "As we prepare to perform a mitzvah or sacred act, we become focused and centered, so that we act and speak with greater kavanah, mindfulness and intentionality. This enables us to unite body, heart, mind and spirit in the whole hearted act of performing the mitzvah".

As we read these words, we may feel we can come closer to nurturing ourselves, engaging our community, and responding directly to Moses's question from Eikev. "What does your God ask of you?" The notion that prayer and mitzvot are at best occasional, separate or arcane pursuits, begins to recede in the presence of our free, active and engaged self. –Perhaps we can ponder the meaning of fear or reverence for God, humility, and self-determination in exactly that state of mind as we enter the consequential month of Elul. In fact, I invite us all to do just that.

Parasha Re'eh (30 Av/August 18)
Neil Litt

Many of us participating today normally daven in the library minyan and we are endeavoring to do what we would do if we were there. Just so, too, with the D'var Torah, which is always related to the Torah portion but often includes supplementary material and ties to personal experience.

Today's date holds special meaning for me and I will begin by sharing why that is. Today is the anniversary of the day I discovered that the Talmud and Midrash are indispensable tools in Torah study. Perhaps many of you have also made that rather commonplace discovery. I do think the individual journey even if it leads to an ordinary destination, always has something unique about it that others may appreciate. So, today I want to share with you how that came about for me and then apply it briefly to this week's Torah portion.

August 18, today, is my son's birthday. Many years ago, a few years after he stopped speaking to me, I was in a Shabbat service on his birthday and the Torah portion was Ki Teitzei, which this year falls two weeks from now, but that year it fell in his birthday week. And I read Devarim 21:18, if not for the first time, then surely for the first time when the words would pierce my heart.

When a man has a son, a stubborn-one and a rebel—a son who does not hearken to the voice of his father or to the voice of his mother-- and they discipline him, but he still does not hearken to them, his father and mother are to seize him and are to bring him out to the elders of the town: "Our son, this-one, is a stubborn one and a rebel-- he does not hearken to our voice." Then all the men of the town are to pelt him with stones, so that he dies. So, you shall burn out the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear and be-awed!

I had never been so disturbed by a piece of Torah. There was no margin for error here. The disobedient, stubborn, rebellious son was condemned to death at the hands of his neighbors. What remedy was there from this harsh decree that surely must give any parent pause before admitting that he could not teach his son to harken to his father?

I don't stop loving my son. I appreciate the complexity of the relationship of father and son and I acknowledge my own possible failings as a parent. So, I don't want my son pelted with stones until he dies. I don't want his resentment to be categorized as evil. But in those brief words of Torah there seemed to be no possibility that God's mercy would outweigh God's judgment.

And when the service ended that day, I waited patiently for a private moment with the rabbi so I could share with him how distressed I was to read those words on that day, the birthday of my son, the rebel.

The rabbi was prepared. He assured me, "The rabbis say there never was such a son."

What did he mean?

He meant that the horrible death sentence had never once been pronounced and carried out. That the interpreters of our tradition hundreds of years ago had felt the same sense of awe that I had in reading this passage and interpreted it as narrowly as a plain text could bear. The Mishnah, the original and earliest oral Torah, reduces the number of acts of rebellion liable for the death penalty to a particular subset of a combination of gluttony and drunkenness-- and it specifies that the food consumed must be something that it is certainly a sin to eat -- for example, an abominable creature-- and the wine consumed must be at least a log of wine-- a liquid measure that equals the volume of six eggs.

The Gemara further systematically limits the conditions of consumption-- the meat must be raw and the wine must be in a concentrated state. The type of gathering in which the consumption takes place provides additional conditions. The son is only liable for punishment if he eats with a group of people who are all good-for-nothings. In addition, he must have stolen the money to buy the meat and wine; some say he must have stolen the money from his own parents and ate and drank the ill-gotten goods in a secluded location beyond his parents' domain. Further, both parents must be willing at the same time to condemn the son, and the son's age must fall within a very narrow window around puberty not only at the time he rebelled and the time his parents complained, but at the time the sentence would be carried out-- an impossibly narrow window in which to accomplish all three. When all is said and done, it is declared, "There never was such a son and there never will be in the future."

So, we might ask, why is this text in the Torah? So, as we might ask, the Talmud asks, why is this in the Torah? The answer is revealed as if God Himself pronounced it: "Expound the passage and you will receive reward for doing so." The ones who are meant to expound it and the nature of their reward are as open to interpretation as the troubling Torah text itself. And one commentator suggests that God's command to expound this passage is directed at parents, and their reward will be that their son will be a worthy student of Torah.

It is from this passage of Talmud that I learned that the study of the written Torah alone is not sufficient. That the rabbis have wrestled with every word of the Torah and have been lenient and empathic guardians of the tradition who we may trust to guide us away from the harshest decrees of an earlier time. And I learned this lesson on this date many years ago. So, on this day, the anniversary of my initiation into the study of rabbinic Judaism-- that is, Judaism that incorporates rabbinic understanding of Torah and reads beyond what is written on the scroll, I stand here as a parent and expound the passage that the rabbis say that God says a parent must expound, and I trust that the reward will follow some day in this world or the next. My son is a good brother to his sisters and a good husband to his wife. May he live and be well.

So, let's look at a brief example of how this supplementary lens might be applied to this week's portion. The portion begins with the words of God, "See, I place before you today a blessing or a curse: the blessing (provided) that you hearken to the commandments of YHWH your God that I command you today, and the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments of YHWH your God and turn aside from the way that I command you today, walking after other gods whom you have not known."

This text seems fairly straightforward in giving the people a choice between following God's commandments and being blessed, or walking after strange gods and being cursed. But one of the oldest collections of Midrashim, Midrash Tanchuma, interpret broadly and enlarge the meaning. I will just share one example.

Rabbi Avin ties the blessings and curses to a verse in Lamentations (3:38), "It is not by the order of the Most High that evil and good come." That is, God placed the blessing and curse in front of us and those who chose the path to blessing are blessed and those who chose the wrong path are cursed. From this point in the Torah, God no longer orders the evil and the good, from here on it became the individual's responsibility to choose one or the other.

Rabbi Avin said, "From that time on, if anyone sinned, God would exact restitution from him. In the past, if anyone sinned, the entire generation would pay for his sin-- for example, the generation of the flood. In the past, the people of a generation were punished for the sin of even an individual. From now on, the entire generation will not be punished for the sin of the individual."

Rabbi Avin compared our situation to that of one who encounters an elderly man sitting at a fork in the road with a choice of one road that begins with thorns and ends in a straight road, and the other which begins straight but ends in thorns. The old man warns the travelers, "Even though you see that the beginning of this road is full of thorns, you should go that way, for it ends straight." Those who listened to the old man struggled at first but arrived safely; those who did not, stumbled at the end.

In the library minyan, it is our custom to have a conversation related to the D'var. So, what might we talk about? If there is one unifying theme in what I have said, it is the connection between my own experience on this date many years ago of discovering my own individual responsibility to wrestle with the text and Rabbi Avin's homiletic interpretation of a key line in this week's Torah portion to suggest that once the blessings and curses have been laid out before us, that we are no longer an undifferentiated people whose aggregated behavior is subject to God's judgment, but we are transformed into a community of individuals who is each responsible for his own fate. So the idea you might speak to in the brief time we have is to imagine finding yourself at a crossroad where an old man sits, or maybe its a child-- maybe your own child, or your own parent; maybe an employer or someone who works for you-- whoever it is-- someone you know, and that person advises you to take the path that is apparently more difficulty because it will deliver you to a better place

than the path that appears to be easier. How do you respond? Do you resist? Do you take it on faith? What do you need to accept this direction?

Parasha Shoftim (7 Elul/August 25)
Richard Fishbane

"You must not go back that way again." This powerful admonition by God early in Shoftim, our parasha today, warns the Jewish people that they may never again return to Egypt. But why this forceful prohibition---why would God be concerned about the Jewish people wanting to return to the land where they were enslaved and oppressed? What is the larger context here---are we as a people supposed to resist the temptation to look backward---to our youths, to our roots, to wherever we came from in whatever time.

There is a temptation in these waning days of summer to want to look back or at least to slow time down. The languorous days of summer leisure inevitably give way to the many challenges of September, Elul, and Tishri. For we know that at this time of year, there are perhaps more transitions to deal with than at any other time. Little ones ready themselves for the first day of kindergarten and bigger ones steel themselves for the rigors of high school and college. Parents deal with the emotions of an emptying or fully empty nest while newly minted college graduates brave the tough transition to a world of work. Rabbis write their High Holiday sermons. Past synagogue presidents hope that the Torahs they have to hold during the Kol Nidre chant have become lighter this year or that maybe the Kol Nidre chant has become shorter. All Jews everywhere begin the process of self-examination that animates the high holidays. Who can blame us for wanting to go back to a few more days on the beach and the carefree days of July and August?

"You must not go back that way again." Perhaps this is not the positive life prescription handed to us in the lovely two words, *"Choose Life,"* but there is wise counsel here in God's directive to the Jewish people. The Torah commands us to move forward ---to not look back too wistfully toward the happy times and beloved places of our collective pasts. Nostalgia for the past is a curious thing---it sometimes seems misdirected. The Exodus of the Jewish people from the slavery and oppression they suffered in Egypt is the central event in Jewish history. It is the event that builds our relationship with our God. And yet, our people seemed ambivalent about their liberation---*"Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert."* How odd that on the verge of a free and prosperous life in the land of milk and honey, our people somehow forgot the hardships of life in Egypt and sought to go backward rather than moving ahead.

This brings me to another Exodus story---the story of Cinderella. Okay I admit that may not be a perfect segue... but I have been thinking about Cinderella a lot lately---primarily because *Into the Woods*, Stephen Sondheim's delicious re-imagining of our favorite fairy tales is in Central Park this summer and will also be seen at McCarter this season here in Princeton. So Cinderella is the quintessential rags-to-riches folktale---really the stories of Ruth and Esther in Jewish tradition. Cinderella is essentially enslaved and oppressed by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters until

God (in this case disguised cleverly as a fairy godmother) swoops in and transports her in style to the prince's ball with her rags replaced by an elegant gown. Prince Charming, in the process of choosing a bride---(why are princes perpetually in the process of choosing a bride?), is swept off his feet by Cinderella until the stroke of midnight arrives and she frantically flees to ensure that the prince does not see who she really is. Knowing the spell is over and that her clothes and coach will revert back to much more humble things--- she inadvertently leaves a slipper in her haste while departing the palace.

Sondheim's version is the same but with one big exception---in *Into the Woods*, Cinderella has the free will to stay with the prince or to return to her oppressive conditions at home. So what kind of choice is that---any girl in her right mind would choose the pomp and the privilege of palace life. But like the Jews in Egypt, Cinderella is surprisingly ambivalent about whether to stay or to go home. She flees irrationally from Prince Charming and agonizes over what to do next. She plops herself down and sings (it is a musical after all) --- and now I'm quoting from Sondheim's perceptive lyrics from the song, "*On the Steps of the Palace*," *So then which do you pick---where you're safe, out of sight, and yourself but where everything's wrong. Or where everything's right and you know that you'll never belong.*

How strange—we long for something better---a way out of our seemingly hopeless present and then we hesitate when the opportunity for something better ---but perhaps something risky and unfamiliar--- presents itself. Rather than risk failure, it may be better to stay oppressed as long as it is a familiar oppression. So in *Into the Woods*, how does Cinderella resolve her conflict---back to Sondheim's remarkable lyrics:

*Then from out of the blue and without any guide---you know what your decision is... which is not to decide.
You leave him a clue---for example, a shoe and then see what he'll do.*

Of course, Cinderella's fate is eventually decided happily when Prince Charming identifies her foot as the one in his entire kingdom that can fit the slipper. But like our own ancient ancestors, she hesitates when she has an opportunity to liberate herself from slavery. While we could not really expect Cinderella to have been much of a Torah scholar, God's message to her would have been abundantly clear---"*You must not go back that way again.*"

One more Exodus story now---and perhaps the one that is most relevant for the vast majority of people in this room. I think of the remarkable exodus of our ancestors from the poverty and anti-Semitism that they faced in Eastern Europe. I have spent my life feeling so grateful for these people who had the courage to face the challenges that awaited them in America without either God or Prince Charming necessarily available to ensure their successful transition to a new land. As a child, I was desperate to learn more about the terrible sea crossings and the tenements and

the economic hardships and the hatred toward immigrants and the amazing resolve that propelled our people to leave Eastern Europe for an entirely new world. I was very close to my grandmother, my mother's mother, and would ask her about life in Europe and the early days for our family in America. And this woman, who was so wise and articulate on so many topics would always answer, "How should I know—I was born here and my family never talked about the old country."

This brings me to the one little mystery in my childhood. Others have big childhood mysteries---uncertain parentage, parental affairs and dalliances, fortunes lost and won. My little mystery centers on the fact that my grandmother died more than twenty years ago---before the Internet opened up new avenues of research and inquiry. So imagine my surprise a few years ago when Ellis Island.org revealed that my grandmother, Berthe Krell, in 1909 sailed at the age of four on the steamship Amerika from Hamburg to New York. She journeyed from Galicia to Germany with my Great Aunt Fanny who accompanied her on the boat. Why had my grandmother lied to me about where she was born? Why did she not want to satisfy my curiosity about my family's roots and passage to America?

Perhaps my grandmother understood God's lesson for us in today's Torah portion. Our immigrant forbears had to overcome so much to help us establish roots in a country that has proven to be so good for the Jewish people. But once they were here, they were Americans; however difficult life on the Lower East Side proved to be, their very existence was no longer threatened every day by fears of famine and Cossacks. No false nostalgia for my grandmother and millions like her---no looking back and imagining a safety and security in Eastern Europe that really never existed. *"You must not go back that way again."*

So as we approach the challenges that face us this September, perhaps we can learn a little something from this week's Torah portion. Indeed, God's proscription against travel to Egypt can certainly be interpreted in a broader way---we must embrace the challenges of the future and resist the temptation to glorify the past. So if your children are off to college and graduate school, celebrate their independence and let them go---do not long for a time when you could more easily control their actions because they were under foot. If you are starting a new job or school, do not look back wistfully to a time when the work and school challenges seemed to be less rigorous. If you are preparing for the high holidays, resist the temptation to look back to the carefree summer days of the last few months. And if you do not want to accept the life advice offered by Stephen Sondheim or even my grandmother, certainly the Torah's guidance is especially timely at this time of year---"**You must not go back that way again.**"