

Often our Shabbat sermon is based on the Torah text, with an attempt to apply these existential lessons to our modern lives.

Thus, ours is a living, breathing, evolving religion.

The Torah, which literally means 'The Teaching', is not only the basis of the Jewish religion...it's the back-bone of Western Civilization...it is the all time best seller... and since Jon Adams used Leviticus and Numbers as the basis of the MA constitution, one could argue that the entire US constitution has its roots in Torah.

But like the US Constitution, one of the many things that I love about Judaism is that there is room for interpretation of our religious texts. Of course, throughout our 4,000 year history, through today, some folks take what Torah says as literal & factual, meaning, for example, that the Red Sea actually split on our way out of Egypt. Other folks, including me, see the text as a conglomeration of Divine metaphor, meant to teach us truths far deeper than facts. But here is the thing, whether the Sea actually & factually split for Moses and the ancient Israelites- I can not say, BUT I can say that it is a fact that we have been teaching this story from parent to child for hundreds of generations...because these stories contain lessons...because these stories contain truths, that **MUST** be learned for us to both flourish, and to survive.

The Torah, our story, we have shared with many others, so many others that it has influenced the fate of the world, and our beloved America since before its inception. For instance:

- The original Puritans thought of themselves as the 'new Israelites', religiously oppressed by "Pharaoh" King George, so they traveled across the 'dessert wilderness' of the Atlantic Ocean, to the 'promised land' that they would call 'America.' These were deeply religious people, which is why they had biblical names like Obediah, Jebediah, and Habakkuk. The Stories of the bible inspired them to have the courage to move themselves forward.

- Another group that clung to the stories of the Torah for courage and inspiration were the African American slaves right here in the America South. Generation after generation they were born under the whip, and the stories of the Torah got them through the darkest night of the American soul. These slaves looked to their bible, and concluded that since God had helped free those Israelite slaves, if they held on... to each other...to their faith...to hope, that one day they too would walk to freedom.

- On a more personal level, I've worked with many people, individuals all, who face tremendous personal challenges from sickness to abuse, from pain to addiction. For many, the story of a people shucking their shackles with trials,

failures, and perseverance is what they need to put one proverbial foot in front of another.

And there are many more...but here is the thing. Each lesson the Torah is meant to be applied to our 'greater society', and to our Jewish community, and to live in our hearts in a way that is profoundly personal. Our rabbis are clear- these texts are not speaking to somebody else, they each are speaking to me...and they are speaking to you.
(pause)

For instance, a few weeks ago we read parshat *Shelach*, (Numbers 13:1-15:41). The name of the torah portion, in Hebrew, is labeled after the first two unique words of this section which are *Shelach Lecha*, which translates as 'Send Yourself onward!' or, possibly as an intriguing reflexive imperative, 'Progress yourself.' *Shelach Lecha* is an imperative, and it is in the singular. Meaning 'You (singular) must progress yourself forward!'

This section begins the test that our Israelite ancestors faced in the wilderness, that liminal place poised between danger and possibility. We were ready, after 430 years of slavery and two years of desert wandering, to finally enter Canaan, The Promised Land, to begin to realize our destiny as a 'free' people. Like we moderns here in America, our Israelite ancestor's serpentine journey through the generations, and the miles since Egypt, had taken us through shadowed Valleys of doubt and despair,

but also hopeful vistas of connection and kindness. Finally, after years of preparation & learning, we were ready to become much more than what we were! Perhaps...

If you remember, Moses sends 12 Scouts to determine the facts before marching, and from these facts, what our challenges would be. Then, like today, each group presented its own set of 'facts' to fit their agenda. And so the reports came back mixed. Ten of the 12 Scouts said, "the land is rich... but the cities are too strong... and the people are giants. We are, to them, like grasshoppers. Moving forward is too much for us."ⁱ These scouts, representing 10 tribes, proposed that our people 'stay where we are, wandering the desert, and to do nothing.' Of course, you and I know that to 'do nothing' is a choice, and with every choice there comes consequence. Our Sages point out that these Scouts, and the leadership that they represented, were fine with the status quo of wandering in circles, and that they were paralyzed by what they were used to.

Only two of the Scouts, Joshua and Caleb, came back with both facts and a plan to move forward. In essence, they reported that 'yes, to conquer the land would be hard, but if we focused on the task, moved forward together, and kept our moral compass true north with God & Torah, we would be successful.' Typically these two scouts, the

minority opinion as it were, are considered to be 'optimistic', but I view them more as brutally pragmatic. They saw that the status quo was not sustainable. They saw that the dangers of standing still, and doing nothing, were greater to our society than were the challenges of moving forward for positive change.

Unfortunately, in the end, the mislead majority ruled, and so the Israelites set their course to wander aimlessly in circles for 40 more years. Until everyone of that generation, the generation who decided to 'do nothing' died out.ⁱⁱ The fact is that the generation of our ancestors who left Egypt as slaves were so shackled, so conditioned, to think 'small' or 'impossible', that they could not step forward even though it clearly was vital for them to do so.

They could have done so much, but chose, instead to do nothing.

Tragic.

It would take another 40 years, led by the generations born into freedom, to take our people into the Promised Land. By 'kicking' the proverbial 'can' down the road, we were delayed by two entire generations before we finally had the courage to face our challenges as a people, and to begin to realize our potential as a Nation, and as human beings.

This Shabbat, leading into the 4th of July celebrations here in America, raises up some questions posed to us from *Shelach Lecha*:

Are we the generation of Americans, (sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends and countrymen)... Are we the generation of Americans, who have the courage to face the daunting challenges that stand before us as a country in order to make America 'the promised land' that all of our immigrant ancestors hoped that it would be? Can we move forward with a moral compass, not just focused on the ends, but the ethical means to get us there?

Or are we the generation who will condemn ourselves to do nothing, and thus to wander in circles through the unforgiving sands, selfishly passing the onus of our problems onto future generations while we all suffer?

Many of us offer up, with each and every tragedy that we see in our society, our heartfelt 'thoughts and prayers', but conspicuously absent are the actions that are required to bring our society to one that is safe, and just, for all of our American sons and daughters.

Do we see through the eyes of the Scouts who saw what lay ahead and chose to 'put their heads in the sand', or are we Joshua and Caleb who saw, with realism, hugely difficult challenges that could be, that had to be, overcome

for the sake of safety, sanity, and the generations of children to come?

Who are we in this synagogue tonight, accomplished citizens all, without the wisdom and the courage to move forward from your ancestors who came before you? They too weighed the risks of staying put versus moving forward, from oppression to opportunity, from tyranny to freedom.

They too risked everything for a chance at a better life, for their children, and the children of their neighbors, to live without fear.

“Please God”, they prayed, “let us be unshackled! Please God, Let us be free so that we can soar!”

It has been captured in turn-of-the-century legend, that first glimpse of America through cold ocean mist. From the choppy decks, they saw first a torch, then an arm, and finally the regal figure of Lady Liberty- welcoming them, beckoning them.

I love the fact that the famous words that adorn this quintessential symbol of American liberty are the words of a Jewish poet by the name Emma Lazarus. Her arms open, her safe harbor awaiting, she croons to us:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your

teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

What Jubilation they must have felt, those people with their prayers and faith, your ancestors with everything to lose: Land ho!. A Fresh Start. Freedom. "Free at Last... Free at Last...Thank God almighty, we are free at last."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what we are doing here tonight.
This is what emanates from our Torah.
This is the ray of light that emanate from Temple Emanu-El, as a beacon for all the nations to see.

A torch that reminds us that we can be free.
That we are not cemented into our past, or even the realities of today.
That we have a moral compass, a pillar of fire, that allows us to see through the dark night, and to *shelach lecha*, 'progress ourselves forward' with a confidence buttressed by 4000 years of Judaism, and the very best of our American ideals.

Together, we continue to move our society away from slavery, into a true state of life affirming freedom.

And so I would ask you all to rise, as I convey our most profound blessing with my deepest respect for you, your dedication, and your families.

"rise"

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ

May God bless you and keep you -

יֵאָר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיַּחַנֶּךָ

May God's countenance shine up you and be
gracious to you -

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיַּשֵּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹמִים

May God's face rise towards you and grant you
peace.

Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ Paraphrase, and various lines, taken from N13:27-33

ⁱⁱ Only two exceptions of the generation who left Egypt would enter Canaan, the same two Scouts who brought back the positive reports. Joshua and Caleb.

ⁱⁱⁱ MLK

^{iv} Turn towards USA flag, with congregation standing, for 'America the Beautiful'