

## lo's D'Var Torah

Good Morning! Welcome to Kohelet and welcome to my Bat Mitzvah! I am so happy to be sharing this day with my family and friends.

I can't resist starting by saying, Today I am a woman! And, as it happens, today I am a grandmother! There is lots of love and joy here.

I want to spend some time sharing with you how I arrived at this day. First, my Torah portion, Vayera, is a really rich magical one. I chose it because it exactly corresponds to the Hebrew year and date of my birth. And it may be no coincidence that in this very Parsha, biblical Rebecca was born. The Torah portion I just chanted lists children born to Abraham's relatives, including "Bethuel who begot Rivka "(or Rebecca). When I found out that Rebecca was going to have a baby—maybe right in the middle of my Bat Mitzvah—I just didn't want to change this special Parsha date.

I'd like to tell you more about how I got to this point—deciding to have a Bat Mitzvah. I have a kind of checkered Jewish past. My parents were Jewish but not at all observant, though I know we went to a seder here and there, and most of their friends were Jewish. In my 20's, searching for a spiritual identity, I trekked through various religious practices, in the true 70's Hippie spirit. I particularly liked Eastern mysticism like so many Jews who came to be called "Ju-Bus"—Jewish Buddhists. But then I decided to see what my own religion offered; I wanted to try out the concept of The Bluebird—or Jewbird--of Happiness Is In Your Own Backyard. I met Jarred and Rebecca's father at my very first Jewish singles event—a dance. He had High Holiday tickets to BMH and invited me along. At this point I had barely spent any time in a synagogue, so at the start of the Torah service when I saw the little group of officiates coming down the aisle with the jangling Torah, and saw the congregants lining up to do something—I wasn't sure what...I fled to the other side of the aisle in terror of messing up some ancient ritual. Nevertheless, we got married, and brought up our kids Jewishly. Later as a single parent I wanted them to keep up their Jewish education. Jarred was living in Boulder with his dad at this time, and I was working at Temple Emanuel, where Susan Berson was the librarian. I was looking for a Jewish after-school program and Susan told me about Kohelet. When I walked in with Rebecca for the first time, not knowing a soul, I was immediately welcomed. And the rest is history!

So, why a Bat Mitzvah? I'd been thinking about it for a long time. Then at Elaine Abrams' Bat Mitzvah last year—because I was so inspired by her 13-year-old insight and wisdom—I thought, it's time. And what is my goal? Well, when I hear the haunting sound of the Shofar being blown each year, I imagine standing on a hillside thousands of years ago hearing that same sound. I want to be part of that legacy. I want to leave my footprint in the sand of my Jewish ancestors.

But a few weeks ago I went through a dark night of the soul. I thought, I don't know enough, I haven't studied enough. I felt that what I really needed was years of serious Jewish education. But can you picture *me* in a darkened room, huddled over heavy Jewish tomes of wisdom with a group of Talmudic scholars? I didn't think so. Then I realized that what this Bat Mitzvah signifies for me is a beginning. It's my initiation at the heart and soul level. I've already begun the learning, and this will continue for the rest of my life.

I also wanted to say a little bit about my parents, since they can be here only in spirit. I have their photos up here with me. Many of you remember my mom, who I think would have been thrilled. My dad, on the other hand, would probably have been more like... fascinated. My dad grew up in an orthodox home but turned away from Judaism at a young age. The story goes that, when he was around 12, he and a group of other boys were enlisted to be shomers, or guardians, over the dead body of some city official. A shomer is someone who watches over the body for 24 hours until the time of burial. This experience apparently frightened him enough to turn him away from Judaism. Ironically, he agreed to have his Bar Mitzvah only if it would mark the end of his Jewish life instead of the beginning. However, the work that he did embodied the true concept of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. He was a wonderful and compassionate doctor and, in addition to his practice, he took out want ads in the San Francisco Chronicle, asking Khrushchev to stop nuclear testing in the 1960's, and also during this time of the civil rights movement he wrote a column for a black newspaper. He had a Jewish soul. I would like to take up where he left off—by making this day the continuation of my Jewish life. My mom loved coming to Kohelet, though she had questioned believing in God since the tender age of 7. She had been standing under a tree and commanded, "God, if you're there, make a leaf fall down." No leaf fell. However, my mom was always interested in spiritual ideas, in fighting for causes, and in helping other people. In her mid-90's, she said she felt the reason she lived so long was so that she could try to do good for others.

And now for my Parsha, Vayera. Many of you will know this story that begins with Abraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent. He was circumcised just 3 days before at the age of 90 (ouch!) Still, when 3 visitors came by he made them a feast. These visitors were actually angels who told him that his wife Sarah would have a child in one year. Sarah laughed. After all, she was 89!

Abraham brings the angels to Sodom since they are supposed to destroy the city, except for Lot and his family. Abraham tries to persuade God to save the city if there are just 50 righteous people and, when God agrees, Abraham tries to bargain him down to 10 righteous people. But apparently Sodom was so depraved that there weren't even 10.

Then Lot invites the angels into his home so they can rest up. They tell Lot they are going to liquidate Sodom but that he and his family can escape. They are told they must not look back. Lot's wife does look back, however, and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his daughters hide in a cave. The daughters think the world is destroyed so they get Lot drunk and seduce him in order to repopulate it. Abraham moves to Gerar, a Philistine city, and Sarah, age 90, gives birth to Isaac. We can only hope she had an epidural.

God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain. He goes so far as to build an altar and hold up the knife. But an angel orders him to stop, and he sacrifices a ram instead. Abraham finds out his sister-in-law has given birth to children, one of them being Betheul, father of Rebecca.

Vayera has so many important events that I was at a loss where to begin. I was inspired by Aviva Siegel's lovely poem on the first day of Rosh Hashana. This rang a bell for me because, in high school and college, I often made my papers into stories or plays—even a game show in microbiology called What's My Culture. So maybe I could write a Parsha musical! I could play God, singing to Lot's wife! "You turned around, It's all your fault, So now I've made you a pillar

of salt... Ha ha ha ha ha! But no, that would be a challenging set design. So I decided to just keep it simple and personal. Because even though this Parsha has been analyzed thousands of times, nobody has ever interpreted it as lo of a certain age—former Hippie-now grandmother.

Trying to come up with a single topic out of this multi-faceted Parsha was daunting. I had more questions than answers. The main one is: Abraham didn't give up on the Sodomites even though they were wicked, so why did God? And since we are all a part of God, why would God want to destroy any of us? Then I got caught up in what makes a righteous person. Would Sodom have been worth saving if there had been even one? After all, God was willing to save the whole city for 10 righteous people. But we are human, and as such we all have a dark side, so the easy answer here is: it's about choice, our free will to chose good over evil. But still, God *could* have made us *all* righteous. Remember when Tevya questions God in Fiddler on the Roof? "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?" In the same way, would it have spoiled some vast eternal plan if God had created us all as menches and allowed us to live in eternal paradise? Well...apparently it would have. I don't have answers for these questions but I put them out there for you to think about.

In reality though, here we are, with life-long tests of our strength and character, stretching to be our highest selves. I did some research on what is a tzaddik, or righteous one. According to Tzvi Freeman, a "tzaddik is a human being like all of us...he feels pain and pleasure, cries, laughs, loves and sometimes burns with outrage—like the rest of us. But she does all these things in a divine way, with purpose and meaning, allowing us to realize that we too are divine, and knowing that everything is a means of connecting with God. He knows how to use *Ohr Ganuz*, or hidden light. The Baal Shem Tov said that every Jew has the potential to be a pious miracle-worker through connecting with their divine soul, which means that each of us is capable of great goodness, that each one of us can bring light into the world.

Binyomin Adilman wrote, "Really, due to the brilliance of the light of Abraham and his great merit, all the people of the world benefited from the newly revealed light of God. The Midrash says that the verse 'And God said, Let there be light' *refers* to Abraham. Abraham bequeathed to every Jew the ability to radiate God's light."

But still we live in an often-dark world and it is sometimes difficult to see that light. Anita Moorjani, a survivor of Stage 4 cancer, wrote a book about a near-death experience she had while in a coma. She had a well-documented spontaneous healing that she describes in the book, but what struck me is the way she described our physical existence in comparison to what she observed in her near-death experience. She wrote that it's as though we live in a huge dark warehouse with only one flashlight to see by. Everything we know about what's contained here is what we've seen by the beam of this small flashlight. We don't know what else exists if we haven't been able to shine our light on it. Even if you do see something, it's so dark that you may not get a clear picture of what it really is. Then, imagine someone flicks on a switch. There, in a burst of light and sound and color, you can see the entire warehouse for the first time. Then you know that what you used to think was your reality was just a speck in the vast universe. You can see how all the various parts are inter-related, and even if the switch goes off again, nothing can take away the wonder and beauty of all that really is.

I believe that, in order to flip the on-switch in the warehouse, we have to see each other as loving beings, we have to be able to be in the presence of anyone and see his loving essence.

Here's the way I personally try to do this when I struggle to find even one redeemable quality in someone. You know those inflatable Santa Clauses on people's lawns that you see absurdly collapsed in the evening? I try to imagine that this person's human body suit has collapsed on the lawn, and inside there is the golden flame that connects them to God. But this is not easy. For instance, when I'm in a clinical setting, I can be compassionate even to hardened criminals. But once I get into my car and get stuck behind some idiot going 20 mph, I *become* like a hardened criminal. Like everybody, I have my 2 human sides. In my Match.Com profile when I was dating, I described myself as a combination of Dostoevsky and Mary Poppins. (This must be a good thing, as it brought me to Niels Loechell). But anyway, the point is that, in the darkness, we can't always see how we are helping someone through an act of kindness, a smile, a gesture, believing in someone, seeing them as the best they can be. I think every act we do has an effect, and the universe somehow hears us. Our acts are like little flames, connecting us to God and lighting up the darkness, helping us visualize that world we aspire to create. I believe that when there's enough light, the world *will* be healed and transformed. So together, let us light the darkness and create that world of which we can only dream.