

Sunday, July 27, 2014

The destination

*My drash - Torah sermon - at Temple Beth El-Mekor Chayim, this Shabbat.
The Parasha (Portion) is "Masei," Numbers 33:1-36:13*

TBEMC Dvar 7/26/14 Parashat Masei
Numbers 33:1 - 36:13

Shabbat shalom

I have been clearing out my office and packing up my things.

As some of you may know, I am leaving my job at "the Joint", the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Next week is my last week. Leaving the Joint was a very difficult decision. I'm proud to be the next CEO of our [Jewish Federation](#). Proud and honored. We do amazing things, with amazing professionals and volunteers.

But leaving the Joint was a very difficult decision.

And one of the things I've been doing these past few weeks is clearing out my office. Some things I'm going to keep, some things I haven't quite decided yet what to do with them. Some things - like [a particularly strong bottle of horseradish vodka](#) - are here today for our kiddush.

And some things went pretty quickly into the trash. For example, I don't know why, I had a huge collection of itineraries and boarding passes from Continental Airlines. Long-forgotten journeys from a long-forgotten airline. Although to be honest, I do miss Continental.

I'm not entirely sure why I kept all these boarding passes and itineraries. Maybe it was to reassure myself that I'd been somewhere.

Believe me, I've been to lots of places these past few years. More than most people would ever want to go anywhere. And I have no complaints. None whatsoever.

I've seen amazing things, met with incredible leaders, and have felt at every step of the way that I was serving the Jewish people and doing something good.

But ... at the end ... here I am.

Right back where I started.

Normally, on itineraries and boarding passes, you'd see that the journey is marked by the destination. Not the point of origin. Normally, when we talk about our journeys, we talk about where we're going. Not where we're coming from.

So it says, at the beginning of this week's parasha, that these are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went to the Land of Israel," right?

Nope. It says "these are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went out of the Land of Egypt."

This isn't your usual kind of masa, your usual journey. This is a journey defined by the point of origin. Not the destination.

I was thinking a lot about this concept of journeys this last few weeks.

Now, for all intents and purposes, I am an American Jew. True, an American-Israeli-British Jew with an accent that isn't precisely 'New Jersey.'

But I'm here, and this is my home. I love New Jersey.

Fortunately, I love diners and I don't see the need to pump my own gas. So that's worked out quite nicely for me.

And like a quarter of Jews alive in the world today, I now live in a country other than the one in which I was born. My journey was – and is – defined by my origins.

Not by my destination.

My identity is mixed, and complicated, and somewhat messy. Which is why this concept of the origins of journeys in the parasha means so much to me.

There was a PBS show on recently about American-Jewish identity and the journeys we make. And in the episode that I watched was a fascinating quote by Rabbi Harold Schulweis of Los Angeles.

His grandfather, he said, came to synagogue because he was Jewish. His grandchildren go to synagogue because they want to become Jewish.

We've become about the journey. About becoming.

And that's not necessarily a bad thing. When I traveled around the world for the Joint I would frequently meet young people who were just now discovering their Jewish identity. Just now discovering what it means to be Jewish.

Once, in a far-off post-Soviet country, I was watching a young woman participate in an educational shabbat service. It was a teaching seminar, and there were hundreds of 'new' Jews. All halachic. All "Jewish" by any definition. But they didn't know what it meant to be Jewish and they wanted to learn. They wanted to 'become' Jewish.

So ... on the stage there were several educators from the local community. And one was doing the kiddush, one was doing the motzi. And this young woman was lighting the candles and explaining what she knew about them. And she was wearing a crucifix. The whole crucifix - not just the cross itself.

I was sitting in the front row looking at the big gleaming crucifix. And I leaned over to my colleague who was the netzig, the JDC Country Representative. "Nu?" I said.

"Give her time," he said. "She doesn't yet fully understand what it means to be Jewish."

He was right. It's a journey. We're all on this journey.

We're all on a journey, like the masa of this week's parasha, that's defined by the starting-point.

We're all becoming Jewish.
Shabbat shalom.