

To A Place That I Will Show You
Parashat Be'ha'a lot'cha
June 9, 2017

Farewell Address to Temple Shalom
Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

There is a place I have heard about, but not yet seen. I hope to get there, but do not know if I will. It is a vision, and an experience. It is about a young man, seemingly destined to take one path, inspired into another, lifting the lives of those around him... and then lost, too early, too young. With his potential, perhaps, still in him.

I am referring to an exhibit at the National Gallery of Art called "Frederic Bazille and the Birth of Impressionism." Bazille was, it seems, primed and pointed towards a career in medicine, when, on a trip to Paris, he took a class in the studio of a local painter. There he found a passion he had never felt before. There he met Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley. He stepped into a circle including Manet and Astruc, became friendly with Emile Zola. He was a key part of the first surge of a wave which changed the way we look at the world. His own work helped turn conventional assumptions upside down. And barely after the beginning of his artistic career, at age 28, he was killed in a battle in the Franco-Prussian War.

On the one hand, we can look at his work and wonder what might have been. What beauty would he have captured, what images might he have created had he lived a longer life? What did we lose here?

But actually, we can never know the answer to that question. As Julie occasionally reminds me when I get stuck on what might have been...

“shoulda, woulda, coulda” are not always the most productive questions.

What we do know is this. He was here. He started down a path. And then he was gone. And that... the fact of the fact, the world as the way it was... that did have an effect... on the lives, on the works, even, indeed, on the art... of those around him. His presence was felt. It mattered. It made a difference. And his absence was felt as well.

And here, then, I turn from art to science. There are spiritual lessons to learn – as those who know me well could tell -- from particle physics. One of the basic laws of the universe posits that there is a push... and there is a pull. Let's face it. We are attracted to one another. Gravity happens. And we are, it seems, pushed away from one another as well. Every object in the universe, every thing, every person, the pin on my kippah, the string at the end of Rabbi Ackerman's tallit, [look around to name other things/people], the wind from the wings of a butterfly in China, a grain of sand on Mars, every thing and every one has an affect on each other. We are, all of us, connected and affected, in ways we sometimes glimpse but can never fully know.

There is a strange line in this week's portion. In the midst of wandering, in the middle of the Wilderness, facing a new challenge, the people look back with nostalgia, they misremember the way it was, they plant fake news stories among themselves about what it was like before. “Don't you recall,” they said,

“all the fish we had for free in Egypt? And the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks and onions and garlic?”

But it's not really the meals they are missing. Something else is going on here. “וְהָאֶסְפֵּיף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבוֹ, הִתְאַווּ תַּאֲוָה; and the multitude, the mass of the people craved a craving; they yearned a yearning.” There was a feeling, a something they once had. The way we were. Something... intangible... something is missing. Whatever it was, they want it back.

Any of us can spend time wishing that things were different. We wish, we want, we yearn for something about yesterday. But it is today. And things are what they are.

So: we all have an impact, an affect, a pull on each other. And: we sometimes pine for what was, instead of savoring what is.

My friends, tonight I look back, and tonight I look around. I wish... and I celebrate, both. And overall, I am proud of the impact I have had here, the ways I think – or at least hope – that I have made a mark. And we have been a part of each other, for the time we have been together.

I speak, above all... I seek, in what I try to do, to shape a synagogue, to create a community of warmth, and depth, and breadth. I hope you feel all of these foundations... in the work we have done.

Warmth. We have opened our arms, and our hearts, to one another. We have built here a culture of inclusion, of acceptance, and of great diversity.

Indeed, we could root these values in this week's portion as well. We can know that what we are trying to achieve here responds to an authentic impulse within the tradition, there for all to see but ignored and overlooked for so long. Two roots of inclusion, indeed, in the tale told this very week – the story of those sad and set apart, ritually impure and therefore unable to partake of the Passover at the time of the communal celebration. This week we encounter the mandate to innovate, to include, to create a special Second Passover, for those who weren't ready at the "right" moment. And this week, too, the tale of gossip and slander and sibling rivalry – Miriam and Aaron muttering and complaining about the Cushite woman Moses had married – an Ethiopian, if you know what we mean! And here, too, were the roots of a more open tent – the interracial marriage challenged was finally fully welcomed, even in the de facto First Family of the Jewish people.

Look: candidly, many communities claim to be open. Almost everyone says they are warm and welcoming. My friends, I think.. I think we have something special here. When I look around, when I come in on a Sunday morning I see a mini-United Nations. One year I sent to the leader of the Reform movement a copy of our bulletin: seven non-Caucasian Jewish faces among the 21 B'nai Mitzvah in a six-month period of time. I see henna at weddings, so many lesbian couples that our young people don't have a clue what kind of revolution we have wrought... and families formed and framed in a dozen different ways.

And once you are here? Years ago, JoHanna Potts and I sat in her office and, at least conceptually – the idea of my executing anything musical is far-fetched, but in concept... we created a children’s choir. Many things flowed from that effort. Cantor Levine’s energetic involvement of all comers, her proactive outreach to encourage whatever anyone can offer.... Rabbi Ackerman’s fierce devotion to inclusion and caring for the needs of every individual... these things come from their own core commitments, their passions and values. But what I saw in them at the outset was precisely the way in which those values fit... with the vision of the community I wanted to create.

Warm and welcoming? I know... I know we have really done it here. There is always more to do, but I am really proud of who we are, of where we are as a community, of how far we have come.

Depth. I am proud of the honesty at the heart of how we learn here. We have connected learning to real issues in our lives: a nationally-noted “Sex Ed is a Mitzvah” panel, the Sukkat Shalom project to create a safe space for controversial conversations, standing for Darfur, public forums on affordable housing, the March for Women’s Lives.

I hope you have felt how far we go in protecting – nay, in prompting, even provoking a searching and searing honesty in our students, young and old alike. (Long ago I learned: “sincerity is *everything* in a spiritual community. So once you can fake that, you’ve got it made.”)

We had an astonishingly good Confirmation program when I came. What I brought to it was a way for our students to hear themselves, to find their own voice, and to put their words on the page of a sacred text right along with all the honored, ancient prayers we have inherited -- even when their voices are in argument and deep dialog with the pages of the past. In this place we welcome questions, instead of silencing them. We believe that commitment and identity flow from integrity rather than the imposition of uniformity. We believe in engagement with the past, knowledge of it – but we know that a tradition only lives if we are true to ourselves as well. In this place we treasure the authentic... and we sanctify doubt.

In our adult learning we have walked well past the Torah, journeyed through the entire TaNaKh, and then, in a unique effort this year, traveled the pathways of Jewish law and lore beyond the Bible: poetry and philosophy, ethics and the esoteric, commentary and codes. We were the first in the area to offer the cutting edge perspectives of the most creative thinkers on the Israeli-American educational scene, with the Shalom Hartman's iEngage series. And we busted beyond the walls of a building, bringing learning to Leisure World and the JCC, Sixth and I and the Foundation for Jewish Studies, in homes and Chavurot with whoever and and whatever or wherever we were called to teach and learn and explore. We have been a place of Depth.

And Breadth. We know that what we say and what we pray, the words in services and study halls alike, only work when they walk with us into the world beyond. We have canvassed and stuffed envelopes, we have stood for Same Sex Marriage and the Maryland Dream Act. We have heard from Cardinals and members of Congress, from settlers and from J Street and the founder of Rabbi's for Human Rights. This past year, in an extraordinary communal effort, we acted on what we knew was right, and helped at least one family find a new home. We have been, as you may have heard me say before, a Jewish congregation, working with a Christian social service agency, to welcome a Muslim family to this country.

In a world with so much to do, and with so much out there, we have gone beyond just what we find "here." We have stood for cooperation where logical and possible, and a new commitment to involvement with our community. We have seen Joint services with other Reform synagogues and sometimes, occasionally, shared spiritual experiences even beyond our own movement. We have worked closely with Jews United for Justice, JSSA, JCADA, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Religious Action Center and the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington where it has made sense for us to do so. We have continued to support Operation Understanding DC with as many or more participants than any other area synagogue. And we have been active with the Interfaith Conference of Greater Washington - I will never forget a scene, when we were hosting one of the Interfaith Conferences gatherings, and the Social Hall was filled with people of every color, from every

corner of the world, dressed in a rainbow array of colorful religious garb, veils and saris and robes mixing together... when at that moment, the only time I am aware of it happening, in walks a lost, lonely, visiting Chassidic Jew, entering a synagogue because he thought he could find, there, a guide to kosher resources while visiting Washington. I quickly grabbed that information for him... but I think I will never forget the color of his face as he walked into the Social Hall, looked around, and realized what he was seeing.

We have seen the number of our young people involved with Jewish summer camps dramatically increase. You know, I hope, how important this is. Solid research and anecdotal evidence align and agree: immersive experiences such as camps are one of the two most important formative factors contributing to positive Jewish identity as adults.

So what is the second one? Above all, as a contribution which makes me proud, we have seen a reengagement with Israel. Five congregational trips and countless other points of involvement, in the 16 years I have been here. That is a remarkable achievement for a congregation of our size. And we have, I hope, dispensed once and for all with the spurious and superficial charge that a deep Jewish connection with Israel automatically implies endorsement of the policies of any particular government. Hooey! To love Israel, to immerse yourself in past and its potential, its challenges and achievements, its culture and cuisine, to step into the very center of the Jewish fate and future, to be a Zionist does not now and never has meant checking all your other values at the door, even

our particularly American connections and commitments and concerns. It means that no more than American patriotism requires agreement with any particular administration. Identity does not mean identical. And the most important line I ever wrote, I believe, the one sentence I would share about Israel which I hope you will remember, is this: “when it comes to ties to Israel, you have to cement before you dissent.”

We have striven for excellence in worship and learning. A mid-size congregation doing so very many things will, and has, shown cracks and strains along the way. And I am sorry for the ways in which a misstep or a misprint, tension or strain, an ill-considered phrase or a priority not shared... has misled or distressed or confused or concerned any of you. We could, and should, always be better. But I am very, very proud of what we have covered, and what we have done here. And I believe with all my heart that a fair and reasonable assessment of our work together reveals a glass that is far, far more than half full.

At a time of transition, I borrow an image from the pagan world. It is the Roman god Janus. The figure who looks backward, but also, at the same time, who looks ahead. And from Roman lore, to British high-culture. On this next step of my own journey, I quote the deep thinkers of Monty Python: “And now for something... completely different!”

Who could have imagined, mere months ago, that we would be heading to St. Thomas? To you who remain in Washington – can you please not give up on issues of climate change? And yes, we are determined to see the coral reefs, while we still can!

But aside from minor personal concerns like Global Warming... wow! What a different world! And what an opportunity. Where we are going – the Jewish community there is very small – but it has had a huge impact on the commerce and culture and politics and society of the island. The blend of natural beauty and colorful history is very appealing. I think if we only have eight people at a service I can count one Torah and one iguana for the minyan! The sand floor is amazing, the reason for it chilling, the candlelit evening services for High Holy Days are said to be magnificent. It is true, I heard, that the synagogue does not allow the throwing of candy – ironically an ancient Sephardic custom banned in a once-Sephardic synagogue. But it's not because the candy will get lost in the sand. It's because when you have delicate, 200-year old mahogany furniture, you just don't go throwing things.

I can only imagine some repetition in services there. I mean, given where we will be, why wouldn't we sing *Eli, Eli* at every service? "O God, my God, I pray that these things never end. The sand, and the sea..."

I have been, since we announced where we were going, I have been truly, stunned by the number of stories I have heard from so many of you, of personal connections and family ties. There was the family whose living room I

entered... only to be greeted by a huge framed poster of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas. Four families from here told me, right away, that you would see me in the next year or so to be with friends who have already planned B'nai Mitzvah there. Our former bookkeeper and a cantorial colleague in the area told me they will see me this February. And at a funeral I conducted just yesterday – the younger sister of the woman who passed away tells me: “oh, yes, we’re members of your new synagogue.” This is, indeed, a small shul with a world-wide reach.

And whether through social media or individual effort, through vacation visits or destination events, I hope, I pray, I yearn to stay in touch with many of you. To, in some new level of relationship, remain a part of each other’s lives.

There are far too many people to thank... for me to attempt to do so tonight. Some of that may take place tomorrow night; more likely I will send one final letter, to all of you, to share those thoughts and feeling. The hour is late, and I want to pull these threads of thoughts together in a final way.

My friends, even in this global, pluralistic, multi-cultural world of fluid boundaries and overlapping identities I believe... I still believe that being Jewish matters. It matters because of our unique history, and the story we share still. It matters because of the impact, the affect we have had on the world, and the many different ways in which the world have tried to deal with us. And it matters because the end of our tale is not yet told; it is an unfolding

story, an ongoing destiny, with new chapters to be written – and you to be its authors.

And I believe you, me, any of us... I believe that we can get the most out of that identity, in the best and most positive ways, by diving deep, by connecting with culture and community and history and destiny. And I believe that the tools which will bring all of those threads together are here before us: text, and tradition; community, and creativity; visiting Israel and learning Hebrew; diversity and inclusion, unity of purpose, and a hint of holiness, a sense of the sacred emerging out of the tapestry of our lives.

The final teacher I want to quote this night... is my daughter Talia. Towards the end of the Confirmation service, just a few weeks ago, she wrote these words:

My parents will say that if they got one thing right in raising me, it is that I love *Star Trek*. My love began as an appreciation of the humor, the costumes, and the Tribbles, but soon it morphed into something else. I began to love *Star Trek* for what it symbolized, and for its power of our world. The world of *Star Trek* is by no means a perfect one. It is not a utopia, and it was never meant to be. Instead, *Star Trek* is the embodiment of hope, of the world the way it could be. It is a world of dreams, of wonder, of exploration, but it isn't light years away. *Star Trek* seems to say 'Look! This is what you almost are. You're almost there, you just need to reach a bit farther.

How deeply, profoundly, mystically, marvelously Jewish! There is a land I have heard about, but not yet seen. It is a space we hope to reach, but do not know if we will. "*L'chi Lach...* To a place that I will show you..." Where every encounter is filled with potential, every setback an opportunity. Where the flame does not go out, and where hope is never lost.

“And you shall be a blessing.” My friends, whatever I have meant to you, whatever impact I may or may not have had... in so many ways, and in the ways I want to take with me... you have been a blessing to me. And you will always be... a part of me.

Shabbat Shalom.