

(This is the address I will present today at the baccalaureate services for the students of Jensen Beach High School and South Fork High School.)

"For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God: of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be God's treasured people. It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; but it was because the Lord favored you and kept the oath God made to your ancestors that the Lord freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

—Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

I want to congratulate this year's graduating class, and I want to remind you of something you already may be thinking about today. I want to remind you—as you prepare for the journey of the rest of your lives—that you already have travelled a long way to get to this day. As you look forward to what is to come, it is worthwhile, also, to look back and appreciate the journey so far.

You all have benefited from parents and other caregivers who have given you a start in life. You may not be aware of it all the time, but the people who raised you have poured a tremendous amount of hope and expectation into your future. Their wishes for your happiness and fulfillment are a big part of what makes each of you the person you are, and the person you are to become.

They may not tell you all the time, but, in you, they see their own legacy. To them, you are the fulfillment of their wish to have lived a meaningful life. Maybe that explains the times when they have been too insistent, or, perhaps held you to an impossibly high standard. To your parents, you are more than you. You represent, at times, a part of their desire to correct the pain of their own past and to do something good in this world.

As you continue through life, live for yourselves. Know that your hopes and your achievements are your own. But also know that the spark that powers who you are today, and who you will be in the future, owes a little bit to the people who love you the most. The people who are shedding a few tears today to see you all grown up and ready to take on the world—they are a part of you forever. Don't forget that.

You also have benefited from teachers, here in High School, but also dating back to that day when you first entered a classroom and called someone "teacher." You all have had teachers you have loved, people who inspired you and challenged you to learn more than you thought you could. Perhaps, you also have had teachers who bored you, teachers who you thought expected too much from you—or too little—but they, too, have taught you lessons that will help you through life.

I know that people don't usually think of teachers this way when they are in High School—I know that I didn't—but this is a truth that you should know about your teachers: Everything they have done, they have done for you.

You are the reason your teachers have worked so hard to get you to learn, even when you sometimes have given up on yourselves. You are the reason they have stayed up late grading mind-numbing quantities of papers. You are the reason they put up with public school bureaucracies. They teach because they are

addicted to the satisfaction they experience in seeing young people learn, grow and become the people they are meant to be. Today is a day for appreciating all that your teachers have done for you.

To your parents, your caretakers and your teachers, you are treasured people. They have set their hearts on you. They have chosen to dedicate a piece of their lives to you. You carry with you the tremendous gift of being worried over, cared for, prized and doted upon. Believe me, I remember that carrying that gift can sometimes feel like an unwanted burden when you are 17 or 18 years old. You may be thinking, “If they do all this to me because they chose me to be their treasure, I wouldn’t mind if they would choose someone else for a change.” I have felt that way in my life, too.

In the Bible’s book of Deuteronomy, Moses makes a speech to the Israelites to prepare them for the final journey they will take into the Land of Israel. Moses has led them for forty years, ever since the day that God delivered them from being slaves in Egypt. Moses knows that he will not be able to enter the Land of Israel with them, but he has this one last chance to teach them the things he believes they need to hear before they go.

Now, I’m not Moses, and you all are not the ancient Israelites, freed from Egypt. But we do have some things in common. I am not going where you are going, and—in the long-run—neither are your parents, caregivers and teachers. You, too, have reached a juncture in life in which you will enjoy some new freedoms, but also some new responsibilities. Everything you do, good and bad, will truly be your own now. Like the ancient Israelites, you carry with you some baggage of your past. You have known times that have constricted your souls and you have integrated those difficult experiences into who you are today. Like the ancient Israelites, you have an opportunity to turn the hardships of your past into the possibilities of your future.

Moses told the Israelites, “God has chosen you to be God’s treasured people.” That’s a message that you should hear today as if it were whispered to you personally, in your ear. You are treasured, not because you are the best football player, the fastest sprinter, the best writer, the sharpest science student, or even for being Miss Congeniality. You have been chosen as a treasure—as we all are—because you are you.

This idea of being “chosen,” as you may know, is part of my faith tradition. For thousands of years, the Jewish people have been known as the “Chosen People.” And, believe me, there have been plenty of times in Jewish history when my people have felt like saying to God, “We wouldn’t mind if You would choose somebody else for a change.” But the big idea of being the “Chosen People” is not just about being favored, and it is not about past victimization. It is about living up to some pretty serious expectations that each person should have for him or herself. It is not enough to know that you are chosen; you must also ask, what mission have I been chosen for?

Being chosen means living, always, with the intention of being the best person you can be. It means doing what you know in your heart is right, even when it is inconvenient. It means remembering your past and the path you have traveled. It means making yourself worthy of the privilege of being treasured.

You are a treasure—all of you. There may be times you doubt yourself and times that you think the odds are stacked against you, but you have been given a chance to fulfill the hopes and expectations that your very life and existence represent. You have been given a chance to make your successes your own, to aspire as no one has ever aspired before you, to make your own difference in the world.

You are loved. You are treasured.

Moses did not tell the Israelites to go off to college, get a career, get a comfortable house to live in, and get a good looking car to drive. That is not why you are here, and it's not the mission for which you were made. Moses, instead, told the Israelites just this, "Remember that God freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

My challenge to you today, my friends, is to remember. Remember the people who have placed their hopes in you. Remember to keep looking back to your core values and to what you most deeply believe in. That is how you will stay true to your mission. Remember that you have received a gift beyond value. Remember that you carry within you the possibility of redemption from whatever Egypt in your past might enslave you. Remember to make your life matter. Remember that you are a treasure.

May you be strong and of good courage as you continue on life's journey.

Rabbi Debbie Goldstein -

This week's Parsha Vetchanan is rather extraordinary, and somewhat intimidating—it includes storytelling and history, the Ten Commandments, and the first paragraph of the Shema. Always read on Shabbat Nahamu, the "Shabbat of Comfort" following Tisha B'Av, it is a fitting parsha to read as we begin to really dig in and prepare for the coming weeks of reflection and soul-searching as we head towards Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It opens, with a deeply personal individual story. Moses gives a farewell speech to the Israelites, telling them how he pleaded with God, asking please let me go into Israel. God refuses, and Moses tells the Israelites, "the Lord was wrathful with me on your account, and would not listen to me. The Lord said to me, 'Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again.'" And he tells Moses to go up to Mt Pisgah, and look out, because he can see Israel but not go in. Then, he tells Moses, "Give Joshua his instructions and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see."

One interpretation of this interaction is that Moses is asking God for a gift as a source of comfort for all he has done, and God says, "I've done enough for you. Leave space for others, because there will never be an end and if you enter Israel, you will only want more." God is telling Moshe to appreciate the abundance of what he already has, see the land, be grateful for what you already have. [Mychal Springer, quoting the Bekhor Shor, the French Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac] Others have interpreted the reason as punishment—Moses did not live up to God's rules for him all of the time, he struck the rock, and as a consequence, could not be rewarded.

Stephen Garfinkel, a scholar at JTS, takes this a step farther, saying Moses' humanity as a leader is seen in the language he uses, blaming the people Israel—"God was angry with me on your account", instead of taking responsibility for mistakes he has made as a leader. This is an indicator that Moses perhaps has peaked in his leadership, losing his balance and letting leadership go to his head; no longer fit to lead, and time to pass on responsibility to someone that will assume it with humility. But he also offers an alternative—the people needed a change in leadership so that they would not be too accustomed to one person, they were going to a new place and a new place would require a different perspective.