

Parashat Ki Tetze
“Political Conventions – and more”
1 September 2012

Stripped to the essence – pushing aside all the hoopla, rhetoric and cascades of balloons, what is the purpose of our national political conventions? I would submit that every four years, it is profoundly healthy for us as a society to challenge our leaders – compelling them to stand in front of us, as they define their vision and communicate their values and priorities. The conventions provide a blue-print for every American citizen, so that when November 6th finally rolls around, each of us – in the privacy of our voting booth – can make an appropriate determination and “weigh-in” on what we believe the destiny of our country should be. At their best, then, the conventions can and should be emotional “stretch moments” – inspiring us to re-invest ourselves actively in the compelling issues of our day.

Our Torah portion of this Shabbat, Ki Tetze, is interestingly enough, also a political doctrine. Moses, nearing the end of his life, posits a society which will be dramatically different from any other

entity in the ancient world. He speaks – not necessarily before assembled delegates in a large hall – but as leader, teacher, and lawgiver – to the community he has guided for more than a generation. In a burst of energy and passion, Moses conveys a clear and crisp vision. Let’s hear some of his words:

“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.” (Deuteronomy 22:8)

“You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.” (Deuteronomy 23:8)

“You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master.” (Deuteronomy 23:16)

“You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer . . . You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it.” (Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

“When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless and the widow – in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.” (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)

In my view, Moses is looking through the long lens of Jewish history and asking us “to stretch – to go beyond what is most

convenient, expedient, material or easy – and instead to aspire to a higher, loftier ideal in all the “nuts and bolts” that comprise a society.

I suspect that one of the more iconic moments in my life – and probably in many of yours – was on a summer evening – July 20, 1969 at 10:56 pm, Eastern time to be exact – as we watched Neil Armstrong step out of his Apollo 11 module and became the first person to walk on the surface of the moon.

On the week that he died, Neil Armstrong’s epitaph should be his immortal phrases which lifted all of us from the turmoil of the 1960’s towards a higher potential: “that’s one small step for man – one giant leap for humanity.”

Most of us are probably not familiar with the name of Sir Ludwig Guttmann. A German Jew born in Silesia, he volunteered as an orderly during World War I in the local Accident Hospital for Coalminers. There, he encountered a strong miner who had suffered a broken back and died a few weeks later. Eventually, Dr. Guttmann became Germany’s top neurosurgeon. In 1938, after Kristallnacht, he and his family fled to England, where he established the National Spinal Injuries Center at Stoke Mandeville. Dr. Guttmann believed ardently that participation in sports could be an effective therapeutic

technique in fostering self-confidence and strength for those with spinal cord injuries.

The first Stoke Mandeville games for the disabled began on July 28, 1948 – the very same day as the start of the 1948 London Olympics. Those games became the forerunner of the Paralympics – which opened this week in London with thousands of disabled participants from every corner of our globe. Dr. Guttmann’s daughter, Eva Loeffler, was appointed the mayor of the 2012 Paralympics Games athletes’ village.

Dr. Guttmann – like Neil Armstrong – like Moses – stretched the boundaries of what had been deemed possible – and in the process – changed our world.

Too often, we stay static-fixed in our routines – rooted in the eminently predictable.

By contrast, how did Emily Dickinson, put it so aptly:

**“We never know how high we are –
Till we are called to rise,
And then if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies.”**