

**Your Children's Children
Bicycling Home
Parashat Va'etchanan
July 28, 2018
Stephen Baum
Temple Aliyah, Needham**

I was bicycling home from my elementary school. My ride ended with a long hill, and I lived about halfway up that hill. I saw someone standing on the sidewalk in front of my house but was too far away to recognize him. I began riding faster. When I was close enough, I realized it was my grandfather. My grandparents lived about twenty miles away, and it was unusual for them to come to my house during a week day. I bicycled faster still.

That is pretty much all I remember, except for something my grandfather said to my father during dinner. He said he had been watching several children bicycling as he waited for me, and that I was the fastest. I remember feeling proud and happy. Reviewing this pleasant memory sometime later, I wondered why I hadn't told him why I was faster – he had waited and watched, and I wanted to be with him.

I woke up in Seattle last week at three in the morning with this memory. Lynn and I were visiting our son and his wife. Three in the morning corresponded well with when I'd be awake in Boston, and I was still jet-lagged. I also was thinking about one verse from today's portion – Deuteronomy 4:10:

“But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children.”

God willing, I will be a grandfather one of these days. I have long known about my obligation to educate my child, both as a new member of a complex world, and as a Jew. It doesn't surprise me that this responsibility extends to grandchildren as well, but why is it mentioned here? And how do a grandparent's teachings differ from those of a parent?



Moses as a Recent Retiree

In the beginning of today's portion, Moses publicly announces his retirement. He has a few tasks to complete – he must provide some guidance to Joshua, his successor, and he must deliver his ethical will, which makes up the bulk of Deuteronomy. I suspect the first four verses of this portion are rarely described as the announcement of a retirement, and maybe I'm over personalizing this as I'm retired, but they are deeply moving.

“I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, “O Lord God, You who let your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.” But 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!”

This short prayer clearly doesn't have the effect that Moses desired. But Rav Simlai, in the Talmud, describes Moses' "plea" as a great model for prayer, for it begins with praise. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained,

"The primary purpose of prayer is not to make requests; the primary purpose of prayer is to praise! To sing! To chant! Prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song. Prayer may not save us, but prayer may make us worthy of being saved.”

The other thing that I find moving about this prayer is its context. Moses is near the end of his first discourse to his people. He tells them about the prayer, and God's angry response. If there was ever a time when he'd want to keep a secret, this might be it, and I find his openness striking.

I think the reference to educating one's grandchildren has something to do with Moses' new status. I realize I'm conflating two very different things: retirees are not always grandparents, and, especially nowadays, grandparents aren't necessarily retired. But Moses is a member of a generation that has almost entirely vanished. His audience, about to cross the Jordan under a new leader, are mostly much younger than him. Some of them witnessed the revelation at Mount Sinai that he recounts later in this portion – some did not.

Moses, of course, is not literally the grandfather of the people to whom he is speaking. But more than anyone he is the father of what will be a new people. Also, we often need to move beyond the literal when reading Torah. Our children's children need not be limited to those who have a genetic relationship to us.

So, what is special about grandparents, defined literally or metaphorically?

Grandparents can be helpful supplements as teachers because they have experienced things that their children have not. Some experiences lose relevance over time, but many are lasting and important.

Grandparents may have the time to plan and to teach, when their children are caught up in the crucial and consuming task of nurturing their children each day. We learn and we teach differently when we have a more distant perspective.

Finally, how many of us learn something when we hear it just once? Important messages need to be repeated because we need to hear them again and again. Any of us can speak to that based on our experiences at High Holiday services.

As Arnold Eisner wrote:

"“Hear, O Israel,” the book of Deuteronomy proclaims over and over, the verb always in the second person singular. The Torah wants every one of us to listen carefully, whoever we are, at whatever stage of life. It knows that each person will hear its words somewhat differently—and will perhaps listen differently—this day than in the past.”

Some of you probably remember DreamWorks retelling of the Exodus story in “The Prince of Egypt”. When this animation portrays God speaking, multiple voices are blended together. I found the multi-vocal voice at the burning bush a profound retelling. Not only do we need important lessons repeated, we need to hear them from different people, from different genders and from different generations. Each retelling adds strength and richness to the words.

Consider the retelling of the ten commandments, which you just heard a few minutes ago. It wasn't a simple repetition – some words are different, and much ink has been spilled about those differences. We are told to ‘remember’ Shabbat in Exodus, to ‘keep’ it in Deuteronomy. But perhaps one of the most important things we can learn is that the Torah has preserved those differences. To quote Alex Sinclair:

Many contemporary commentators build philosophies of pluralism on this Biblical oddity—for if our canon includes multiple formulations of The Ten Commandments themselves, then surely it is telling us that pluralism, difference, and diversity should be core hallmarks of our tradition and identity?

Back to the Bicycle

I'm not the bicyclist I once was – I don't ride as far nor as fast as I once did, and I pay more attention to the length and gradient of hills on my route. But on a good day I still like climbing hills. I don't often think about this anymore, but somewhere in my head I still ride up a hill as though my grandfather was near the top, waiting for me.

Shabbat Shalom.