

Rabbi Raymond Zwerin
Temple Sinai / Denver
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“Whose Torah Is It, Anyway?”

First of all, a huge thank you to Rabbi Rheins for inviting me to speak tonight. The invitation was most gracious. “Hey, it’s a very special weekend. The 52nd anniversary of Temple, your granddaughter’s Bat Mitzvah. You have family coming in from here and there to celebrate this special occasion. Why not ... as they sing in the movie “Chicago,” razzal dazzal ‘em?” Well, with all that has been going on these past several weeks, my razzaler-dazzaler has been on the fritz. Actually, I’m still recovering from standing under a chupah in 95 degree weather, at 4 o’clock in the afternoon for half an hour last Sunday. Now I know what it must feel like to be a pot roast in a slow cooker.

Tonight I want to talk about Torah. Not so much about the Torah, Moses’ Torah, the big Five Books; I really want to talk more about our personal torah – torah with a small “t.”

And yet, in order to introduce our small t torah, I need first to say a few words about the big T Torah. For the past four weeks in synagogues throughout the Jewish world, we have been reading the last book of Torah – the book of Deuteronomy. In Hebrew, the book is called *Devarim*, because that is its first major Hebrew word, which means "words"– *Ayleh HaDevarim* ... These are the words that Moses spoke to the Children of Israel at the banks of the Jordan River....”

The Greeks of Alexandria, Egypt, were the first to translate our Hebrew into another language, and so they took it upon themselves to give the books Greek names. This last book of Torah inherited the Greek word – Deuteronomy, which as most know, has nothing to do with Windex. *Deutero* means second and *onomy* means telling. So the title implies that this is the second telling of much that was already told once before in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Except, the Greeks were wrong! It isn’t the second telling at all.

Those other three books of Torah are descriptive of events that took place – events from the enslavement in Egypt, to the escape through the Reed Sea, to the wilderness experiences, to Mt. Sinai and the giving of the 10 Commandments, to the incident of the golden calf mask to the building of the Tabernacle – the Mishkan, to the various oases and battles, replete with manna and holy fires and water from rocks. All three books are told in the third person as if by a reporter on the scene. Most of those verse begin with the words “*Vayomer Adonai El Moshe Laymor...* and Gd spoke to Moses, saying...”

What’s more, those events were all experienced by the generation of the Exodus – they lived it, they knew it, it was their story, it was their Torah.

With Deuteronomy, the scene changes. Moses and the people are no longer in the desert, they are camped along the banks of the Jordan River, just a few yards away from their goal, on the cusp of their milk and honey dream land. But it’s not the same people. The Exodus generation – perhaps known in those days as Gen X – has died. Except for Moses and Joshua, anyone over

age 20 at the time of the Exodus is no more. This is a new generation standing at the shore of the Jordan. They are a *tabula rasa*, knowing little more than what their elders have told them, mostly bits and pieces, fragments of events that took place, fragments filled with awe and wonder, miracles and lore ... much of which would have been head scratching to the youngsters.

So, Deuteronomy is different. It is not told in the third person. It is not a reportage. Nowhere do we read the words, “And Gd spoke to Moses, saying...” This is not a redo, not a retelling at all. It is Moses telling this new generation his truth, sharing his understanding, giving his torah of what took place during these past 40 years. It is a first telling, his first telling, to a generation who hadn’t lived it. And he is nearly frantic that they listen closely, that they hear him, that they internalize the laws and commandments, the values and virtues that Gd has shared with him and with those who crossed the wilderness with him. The middle three books of Torah are descriptive about Moses and the people; Deuteronomy is actually the torah of Moses – it is his take on what happened and what Gd expects of this and every generation to follow. For a certain, some of Deuteronomy is written in the third person, but it is as if he is making himself into his own reporter saying things such as, “Then Moses set aside three cities as refuge sites...” and “This is the teaching that Moses set before the Israelites...” as if he is reporting on what he set forth to do or did years ago.

Had it not been for the fact that this book actually made it into the Torah (big T), one might have read this as a personal remembrance of significant events in the life of one person. A sort of personal torah (small t), if you will.

Everyone has a personal torah - small “t.” In fact, everyone has many small t torahs. They are the stories we remember of the various parts of our lives and they are personal to us because only we remember the events from our personal perspective. No doubt every aspect of our lives could be a Rashimon-like experience, seen differently by different people all of whom were present at the time. And yet, it is our torahs that inform us, that shape us, that make us who we are.

There is no doubt that my memories of experiences enriched me. For example, I have a unique remembrance of Shabbat. I’m three or four years old, in my grandmother’s kitchen. My mother and her three sisters are sitting with grandma around the oblong table with wads of cotton and a huge mound of dry pine needles before them. And as they chatted away non-stop, their fingers were busy pinching a flake of cotton and rolling it delicately around a pine needle, more cotton, more rolling until the needle was entirely wrapped and placed in the finished pile. Hundreds became many hundreds, the pile grew, and when there were no more dry needles to wrap, grandma gathered them carefully and placed them in a silver container which almost magically was just as wide as the needles were long. Shabbat evening, and we gathered in the kitchen again. There was a small flat plate – amber colored, its sides fluted up half an inch or so from the bottom. With measured care, grandma poured about 1/8 of an inch of olive oil onto the plate and then with extreme care placed 7 cotton swathed pine needles equidistant, tops leaning against the plate’s lip, bottoms soaking in the oil. Seven – one for each of her five children and two for herself and grandpa. For a long moment, she covered her eyes, then took a deep breath, struck a match, and lit the wick-like needles. And as she said the blessing aloud, the scent of pine wafted up, spirit-like, filling the room. My earliest Shabbat torah was of cotton and oil and the scent of pine. To this day, when I am in a pine forest, Shabbat and grandma, and reflections

of my aunts and mother flit and tease and invite me to remember.

And I have a personal torah to share of my parents, pioneers of Culver City, a small enclave on the edge of Beverly Hills and Hollywood and Santa Monica, creating a new synagogue with a handful of other Jewish newbies to California in the mid-1940s.

And a torah of being the first graduating class of the new Culver Jr. High and the second of the new Culver Sr. High. And a UCLA torah that might be longer than Deuteronomy. And then an Israel torah and a meeting Rikki torah and our wedding torah, that we open quite often and retell to one another just for kicks.

But here we are tonight on the eve of the 52nd anniversary of the founding of our Temple, and on the eve of the becoming a Bat Mitzvah of my favorite granddaughter ... and like Moses recalling a past that many were never around at the time to know, I have a brief torah about our Temple's beginnings to share.

Now Arlen Ambrose, our first board secretary, wrote a very nice overview of the Temple's beginnings, but that was his torah, so to say. We were involved in different ways; we camped at different watering holes.

It was the middle of March, 1967. After several parlor meetings and information sessions, there were about 70 families that had put down checks for \$25 as a way of saying, they were all in in forming a new synagogue in southeast Denver. That in itself was already a remarkable achievement for a three month venture, and it was now time for those 70 families to gather to meet one another and to make a few decisions. We weren't an entity yet. No papers had been filed with the state, no incorporation papers drafted; we were still just an idea supported by a bunch of small checks. Abe Wagner, one of the four original family members and then the associate director of the JCC was to run the meeting, which I purposely did not attend. So Abe called me to get an agenda for the meeting.

"We need 4 things," I said. "First, get correct addresses and phone numbers of everyone, and create a calling tree – two people call six, who call six more." Everyone had a land line and an answering machine. Most women back then were housewives and were home much of the day. An efficient calling tree could reach everyone in an hour or so.

"Second, we need no more than 18 people to volunteer to serve pro-tem on a board of trustees. Could be less, but not more. Have one become treasurer, one become secretary, two vice-presidents, and one to volunteer to serve as president until we have an official annual meeting and election in 6 months or so."

"I've decided to have our first worship service on Friday, Sept 1st. So we need to establish an official date for the founding of the congregation. It should be before the Sept 1st service."

"Does Aug 31st work?" he asked. "Works for me," I said. "OK, let's not sweat that one. The 31st it is," Abe said.

“Finally, Abie, we need a name for the shul. It should be a name that starts with a letter close to the beginning of the alphabet, so that we can be first on the listing of synagogues in the Yellow Pages. Let new comers to Colorado call us first. So, something like Beth El or Beth Elohim or B’nai Aardvark or Anshei Aaron. Got it?” “Yep, Got it.”

So the next morning, Abe calls to report in. “Great meeting. We picked up three new families, and another is thinking about it.” “Good,” I say hesitatingly. And?”

“We established the calling tree; two women in charge, names passed out. And, we got 18 board members, all very good, and five officers as you said.”

“OK, I’ll want the names. I’ll call to congratulate them and call a meeting with them for next week. They can get started on a number of things. Abie, Abie, what’s the name?”

“Well, no one really liked Bet or Beth anything. One guy said that his ex-wife was named Beth and he wouldn’t attend services at a temple with her name.” Oy.

“Another suggested Temple Jeremiah. People started to get real excited about that name. Nice ring to it; unusual, too. But then someone said wasn’t he a prophet of doom? That killed that idea. And then a suggestion seemed to just take over the room; we discussed it, called for a vote, and adopted it.” Nu?

“Sorry, but it starts with an S. Hey, that’s only 19 letters down,” Abe teased.

“Please, not Shalom.” “Nope, further down ... Sinai. Temple Sinai!”

“Abe, Temple Sinai does not start with an S; it starts with a T ... but what the heck, I do love it. We’ll just have to establish a bigger and better reputation for ourselves.”

So, it’s the last days of August, 1967 YF (the year of our founding). I’m writing a sermon for our first service on Sept 1st. Everything is ready to go. The Ark is finished and it’s set up at First Plymouth Congregational Church. Simi Fleisher the organist and HHD choir director has put together the music – oldies, but goodies all. The used prayer books, courtesy of other congregations, have arrived, we have two Torah scrolls (big T) courtesy the now defunct JCRS. It’s August 31st, early evening, and Rikki is in the hospital delivering baby Ron. So baby and temple were founded on the very same day, and the calling tree was used for the first time to deliver the birth news and the fact that our first service would be delayed a week, to September 8th. And it was so.

An interesting addendum to my torah of beginnings is that the number 52 written in Hebrew letters is *bet nun*, which spells out the word BEN, which means SON. Go figure.

Deuteronomy in Moses’ telling is often just a tad different from what previous books tell us about the words and events of the past, but just like Moses, everyone’s torah needs to be told to the next generation, lest they be left to create accounts out of their imagination, and wander aimlessly through deserts of lore that connect to nothing, when just a little bit of personal torah

can have them breathing the fresh scent of pine as they tear into warm torah memories.

While we can, let us share our personal torah memories with those we love and care for. May the recollections of our personal torahs, always carry with them a positive value or two and broad smiles. Oh, and a happy 52nd birthday to Ron and to Temple Sinai.

Amen