

## “Sabbatical Scenes”

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Congregation Beth Torah

My entire sabbatical can be found in this week's parasha! Now I didn't destroy any idolatrous shrines, or sacrifice any burnt offerings, or follow any false prophets...but the essence of *Parashat Re'eh* was at the core of this incredible sabbatical experience for me. I am not a Levite...although I feel a special kinship with Levites. A couple of Sundays ago I was invited to speak at the Church of the Incarnation, an enormous Episcopal Church on McKinney Avenue near downtown. In the question and answer session that followed my talk, someone asked me about what it's like to be a rabbi. I think I surprised her when I said, "let me begin by thanking the church for my job." Not knowing where I was going with that, the crowd was on the edge of their seats...kind of like you are now! I told them, that it is only in recent history that being a rabbi was a job that you could make a living at...In fact, for most of the history of the rabbinate, rabbis typically had other jobs: like being a tailor, or a butcher, or a shoemaker for which they got paid. Even the sages of the Mishnah had other jobs: R. Chiya and R. Shimon (bar Rebbi) were partners in a silk trade. R. Elazar (ben Tzadok) and Abba Shaul (ben Botnis) sold wine. Reish Lakish was a gladiator! It was typically on Shabbat or in the evenings when rabbis would teach or give lectures by virtue of their scholarship. It was only after the European Enlightenment when Jews and Christians lived in closer proximity than ever before that Jews noticed that Christians actually have a religious professional at their beckon call 24/7. What a great idea, thought some Yid, we should have that too...and hence the modern rabbinate was born! The truth is, and my parents are here to corroborate this, I am really not qualified to do anything else but this. Beyond your simple light bulb change, I'm pretty much hopeless. [Though one of my sabbatical feats involved changing the flapper in my toilet. For me it was a big deal, but Sari still doesn't like how it flushes.] So you see, I am grateful that I can actually get paid for doing this! That was the lifestyle of the Levite, who the Torah tells us in 14:27 *Ein lo chelek ve'nachalah*...he had no land, no inheritance, no gainful employment outside of his functions at the tabernacle. That's why the Torah says: *Lo*

*ta'azveinu*, do not neglect him...Because if you do, he has no other recourse to survive. His well-being is dependent on a supportive community. That's why I am particularly grateful to the board and families of our shul for supporting me, for not neglecting me as I relished this time off to reflect to rejuvenate and to recharge.

I don't know if any of you saw the New York Times on Sunday (8/1/2010), but on the day before I returned from my sabbatical, the Times ran an article titled: "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work," which described rather unsettling findings--that members of the clergy now suffer obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many, according to the findings, would change jobs if they could." Oy! Because we members of the clergy often have "boundary issues" the recommendations from mental health professionals and religious organizations overwhelmingly called for time off as an antidote to these life threatening affects on people who believe that serving God means never saying no; or people who think that self care is somehow less holy than caring for others. I will admit to you that I wrestle with a lot of these challenges myself. Mostly it's because I love you, and when you are in pain, I want to be by your side; and when you are rejoicing, I want to dance with you! It's hard to stay away, and that's why I was grateful to Tony for instructing the office to take me off all the email distribution lists; and why I was so grateful to all of you for allowing me to not return phone calls or answer emails for a while.

Of course this is all germane to the parasha's discussion of the *shmita*...which introduced the world to the notion of the sabbatical in the first place. Astrophysics professors at UTD have our parasha to thank for the radical notion that leaving something alone for a while actually makes it more productive, more fertile than if you constantly toil away at it. When the Torah commanded the land to lie fallow every seven years, giving an inanimate object a Sabbath rest, it taught a much greater lesson for human beings who function so much better when we are allowed to disconnect and unplug from time to time. Unlike many of the pastors who were profiled in the New York Times article, I have a gift that comes around much more often than the occasional sabbatical. And that gift, that precious gift that I protect and guard with all my being is called Shabbat. Some ministers actually spoke of incorporating more Sabbath into their lives, though they didn't necessarily do it on Sunday and certainly not Saturday. But

the growing awareness across religious communities that maybe God was on to something when He commanded us to give it a rest every seven days is starting to take hold. The truth is I don't know what my life would be like without Shabbat. Not just because I'm a rabbi, but because, like you, I am a busy person with a lot of commitments and a fair share of stress. To be able to circle the wagons around my family and my faith community and not let anything else in is a gift I am uncompromising about preserving. It is my life-line, it is my sanity.

Of course the whole parasha is prefaced by the phrase: *ki atem ov'rim et ha'yardein lavo lareshet et ha'aretz...* That you will cross the Jordan River and come into the land and take possession of it. Among the many wonderful things that happened during my sabbatical, the greatest was crossing into the land of Israel, and along with 48 other people [many of whom are here this morning] and four of whom were my wife and kids, and taking possession of our precious homeland. What a joy it was to see Israel through the eyes of so many dear friends here at Beth Torah. And when I tell you that I was awash with emotion, as I saw you stand in amazement at the panorama of Jerusalem, or Masada, or the many other places we explored together in *Eretz Yisrael*, it would be an understatement. This summer I went to the Kotel, the Western Wall, 20 years almost to the day, after the first time I ever stood there. I have been back countless times in between. I lived in Jerusalem for a year, I have brought several adult and teen groups there; I have come and gone numerous times. But this time, I walked up to the Wall for the very first time with my little Ezra. He didn't really understand what that place was all about...most adults don't necessarily get that it was actually a retaining wall of the Temple mount, but not actually a wall of the Temple itself. But together we put our hands on the stones and we said the *Sh'ma*. Then I asked him what he thought of that place. He paused for a moment...he looked around at the other people praying...he looked back at the stones...and my not yet four year old said, "Hashem is everywhere." Yes my son...from that holy place you understood that God is available to us wherever we are in the world. You got it. Just like my seven year old got it when we were driving into Jerusalem after visiting with friends in Modi'in, the place where the Maccabees once lived that is now a sprawling, beautiful, modern city designed by the famous architect Moshe Safdi. As we climbed the roads leading up to Jerusalem, I heard, ever so faintly from the back seat of our rented Hyundai i30 Nessa's voice singing: *Yerushalayim shel zahav, v'shel nechoshet ve'shel or...Jerusalem of Gold* she was singing...unprompted, just because. A song she learned in school now became a celebration of what

she was seeing and doing and experiencing in Israel. She got it. And my nine year old, my Mia...she got it as soon as we landed at the airport in Tel Aviv.

But lest I forget a critical part of the parasha, beginning around chapter 14, and detailing the laws of kashrut, I believe one of the holiest sites we visited in Israel was the kosher McDonald's. In fact we visited several...In Mevasseret Zion, in Beit She'an, in Ben Gurion Airport. We collected all but one of the Shrek characters from the happy meals, and my kids got to feel that exhilarating American luxury of ordering fast food under the Golden Arches. Honestly what made Israel so impactful for my family is the ease of Jewish life for observant Jews. I wanted them to know that, even though I think Dallas is pretty amenable to an observant Jewish lifestyle, that there is one place in the world where Jewish life is the norm instead of the extreme exception. I think they got that too.

I'll conclude with one final scene. On the last morning of our visit to Israel I went onto our apartment balcony to *davven*—to recite the morning prayers before we left for the airport. Our balcony had a great view of the newer sections of the sprawling city of Jerusalem, and that morning was cool and beautiful. With my tallit and tefillin straps flapping in the breeze, I began to recite the *birchot ha'shachar*—the morning blessings, you know the ones on page 10. The strangest thing happened...my eyes fixated for some reason on the 14<sup>th</sup> blessing...*Barukh Atah Hashem, ha'Notein leya'eif koach*. Praised are You God, Who gives strength to the weary. I couldn't move my eyes off that line for a while. In that moment I experienced the purest *kavvanah*, the most crystal clarity I have ever felt in prayer. Thank you God, from my perch here in the holy city of Jerusalem, for restoring my strength. I had been weary before my sabbatical. I was tired. I wasn't feeling particularly inspired or inspiring. But that morning I sensed a new energy surge through me, and an overwhelming sense of gratitude for this gift of sabbatical time. *Barukh Atah Hashem, ha'Notein leya'eif koach* ...Thank you God for restoring my strength. And thank you my friends, and congregants, for supporting that gift and for welcoming me back.

Shabbat shalom.