

Parshat Terumah 5776: Lessons from the Road about the Power of Jewish Peoplehood – Rabbi Michael Schwab - 2/13/16

(Written for speaking purposes only)

Our Torah portion this morning speaks about gifts – gifts our ancestors were asked to contribute to God and to community during the construction of the holy *Mishkan*, the religious, cultural and spiritual center of our ancestors. These were gifts given from the heart for the sake of our people – for the sake of *all* who would use that sacred space.

In many ways, therefore, this *parshah* is the perfect one for my return. For I was given a wonderful gift by this congregation – an opportunity for Sabbatical time to be with my family, to experience our great country with them and to visit other Jewish communities in different parts of the United States. This was a gift given to *me*, but in turn it is a gift which I hope to use to strengthen our own community by bringing back all that I have learned. What is more, from each of these Jewish communities to which we reached out in our travels, we received a gift as well. For on this trip, we truly experienced what it means to be part of the Jewish people – what the bond of our connection as Jews actually translates to in real life with others, who often were complete strangers to us other than the fact that they were fellow Jews. Thus, in lieu of a speech or essay-like sermon, I would like to share some anecdotes from my trip that illustrate the gifts we received from

fellow Jews around the country who taught us first-hand the beauty of what it means to be lucky enough to be part of the Jewish people.

For those who don't know, my family and I recently returned from an almost six week journey to the southwestern section of the United States. We did so in a forty foot motor coach, which my kids just called "The RV", in which we lived for much of the trip. We have gratitude to Gerry Schechter for lending us this wonderful vehicle. For those who didn't see it in the Beth El parking lot the week leading up to our departure, let me just assure you that it is *very* big and for that reason, as well as the fact that we also towed our car behind it, it was not the easiest vehicle to park ☺ So first, I just want to express great appreciation to all of the Jewish institutions who allowed us to park our vehicle on their premises, often overnight so that we were essentially living in their parking lots, even, and especially, when the people who gave us such permission didn't know us personally. They just knew that we were Jews who were visiting their community and needed a place to stay. We camped out in the parking lot of the St. Louis JCC, the one synagogue in Lubbock Texas, a Conservative Synagogue in La Jolla (which was actually Ken Levin's former synagogue) a synagogue in Anaheim, outside the house of congregants of Shomrei Torah in West Hills near LA (and the rabbi there had offered their parking lot as well), and outside the home of congregants of a small shul in Santa Fe. Not to mention that we were hosted on a

number of occasions by wonderful friends who were either Beth El congregants (thank you Cheryl and Carey Cooper as well as Jeff Zilka, Ivy Stern and Manny Marczak) or friends we met through other Jewish experiences throughout our lives. While we also stayed at a number of RV parks (an experience which could be the subject of another sermon) and even though we were traveling the United States generally, our trip was truly blessed with the steady hospitality of our *Jewish* community which was always open to us wherever we went. A fact our family will never forget.

So on to a few quick stories. Some of you may have been aware that about six weeks ago (right around Christmas) there was a historic blizzard in New Mexico and Western Texas. Well, it was a Thursday and we had just left my brother and his wife, who are professors that live in Lawrence Kansas, and we had begun a long drive to Santa Fe, New Mexico where we intended to spend our first Shabbat. During the drive Erica, as became our custom, checked the weather forecast for Santa Fe again. What had once been a forecast of mildly cold with the potential for flurries had quickly turned into blizzard warnings. And after checking things out with our local contacts, Manny Marczak and Jeff Zilka, we determined a visit to Santa Fe was not wise that Shabbat because as Santa Fe is in the mountains, it was going to get a large snow fall and if we made it in, it was unclear when our vehicle would get out. But also knowing that Santa Fe was so elevated

we just thought that it was there in particular that was going to get that much snow. So we checked Albuquerque - blizzard warning there too.

Then we decided, OK, we will skip the Santa Fe/Albuquerque area and go right to Southern New Mexico, our next destination. When does it ever blizzard in Southern New Mexico? Well it turns out the answer is Saturday Dec. 26th 2015 – just when we wanted to be there. Not believing her eyes, my wife found a weather map of the storm and we discovered that the only place in even somewhat driving distance that was out of the reach of this huge blizzard was San Antonio, Texas – way south of where we were. From Kansas we certainly were not going to make it in one day and we had Shabbat in between. So I started to head south and Erica started looking at what cities in between western Kansas and San Antonio had a Jewish community and might want to take in a traveling band of Chicago Jews fleeing a freak desert blizzard. Well we found one -- *Congregation Shaareth Israel* of Lubbock, Texas. While driving Erica found the website of this synagogue, got the e-mail for the rabbi and wrote to her. Within a short time, we got a wonderfully warm e-mail inviting us to be with their congregation for Shabbat and giving us permission to park and dwell in their parking lot. We soon discovered that the rabbi had just had hand surgery and despite that (and against the wishes of her DR.) had e-mailed the President and others letting them know of our arrival and asking them to greet us into the community. Soon after, the

President was in touch and between the two of them inquired of all of our needs and what they could do to help. While the President and others didn't quite understand *Shomer Shabbat* and its restrictions, which they discovered didn't allow them to offer us all of the hospitality and help that they would have liked because the shul was not in walking distance to where the congregants lived, the offers were incredibly appreciated and the feeling of being welcomed and taken care of when we weren't sure where we could be for Shabbat made us feel grateful to be Jews.

As the case with many small Reform synagogues the only service they had was Friday night. The whole family attended and while it was definitely different than Beth El, the combination of some traditional liturgy, good music and meaningful English readings made for a nice service. The congregants were friendly and adored our kids – plus the oneg was full of sweets and drinks which we all enjoyed. What made it even more special is that when Shabbat ended we were greeted with caring concern in the form of kind warnings that the blizzard was also coming to Lubbock and that we should be on our way to be safe or if we wanted, we had offers to stay with folks in Lubbock to weather the storm. It was so touching that their caring extended beyond the time we were in front of them and that they kept us in their thoughts as they watched the progress of the storm.

We decided to leave right away and had a harrowing trip to San Antonio that night (you can ask me about that at Kiddush) but it warmed our heart to wake up the next morning to this e-mail from the rabbi. “I hope you are safe and warm. I'm watching the huge gusts of wind & snow streak down the street & have been so worried about you!!!” And when we wrote back that we were safe she replied: “I'm so glad you're safe and out of this weather!! I'm just so sorry I missed you because of the surgery & was feeling so awful not to be able to host you...If you come back, let me know ☺ Thank you...and warm good wishes-*nisiah tovah & shavuah tov!!*”. While what they actually did in the end, let us park in their parking lot and attend their services, was fairly simple, the congregation went above and beyond in making us *feel* welcome, in caring for us and showing a real sense of concern and compassion even once we left their community. I believe that my children got a real sense of what it means to be part of a Jewish community from that experience.

In totally different circumstances, two weeks later but with no less warmth and hospitality, we were welcomed into *Shomrei Torah* Congregation in West Hills, California. Before we knew we could park in front of our friends house who were congregants there (just happened that there was a space large enough) the shul went out of its way to try to make sure we could park there (talking to the school they share their property with, measuring the dimensions of the smaller,

“shul-only” parking lot to make sure we could fit), and of course offering meals and hospitality. My family and I were welcomed from the *bimah* on Shabbat morning and our kids were doted upon during the service and at kiddush. So many friendly congregants introduced themselves, and the rabbi, who is a friend, and his wife couldn’t have been nicer. West Hills felt more like home, here at Beth El as they are a pretty traditional Conservative shul and they even had a guest speaker who was originally from Deerfield so we had a direct geographic connection. We closed the kiddush that Shabbat and the kids really enjoyed themselves there. From this experience we learned, as a family, that a meaningful Shabbat experience at shul can travel with you as long as there is a Jewish community where you are that can support a dynamic synagogue.

The last story takes us to our last Shabbat of the trip in Santa Fe. In another example of incredible hospitality I had called in advance the local Reform synagogue that had joined forces with the Conservative minyan and they couldn’t have been nicer. However, their parking lot wasn’t big enough to accommodate us because they were having a big program that Friday night. So they told me to call a cultural center nearby, mention that I was a rabbi and guest of the shul, and ask if I could park there so we could attend services. The Cultural Center actually said yes and we thought we were all set! Well, the lovely people at the cultural center were definitely not knowledgeable about RVs when they said we could park there,

their permission turned out to be an invitation to park in their overflow lot which was a large dirt lot down a steep hill that because of melting snow had turned into mud. I am quite sure we would have been able to get down and park there, but I am equally as sure we would not have been able to get back out! Fortunately, because I noticed the steep hill I checked things out *before* driving down there, so we didn't get stuck. But **un**fortunately it was now Friday afternoon, less than two hours before Shabbat and we had no place to be.

Luckily Manny Marzcak, a Beth El congregant who now lives in Santa Fe, had given me the name of another rabbi of a small Orthodox shul. I called him and he was fantastic. He made some calls and within a short time he had spoken to a congregant who said we could park on their street in front of their house and they would be happy to help us in anyway and take us to the shul the next morning. So with the husband on the phone guiding me turn by turn so I didn't get stuck on small Santa Fe streets the GPS suggested but through which the RV wouldn't pass, we made it right before Shabbat.

We had a lovely Shabbat dinner and the next morning it was off to shul. It was a small place with an eclectic crowd but the people were sweet. We met a man who was a ski instructor in Santa Fe and gave us great advice about how to get inexpensive lessons there, which Ari and Liana did, as well as a number of others who all tried to help make our stay as wonderful as possible. For kiddush

they had homemade *cholent* and lots of other food and though there were invitations for lunch aplenty we set out to meet Jeff Zilka and Ivy Stern (two more Beth El Congregants) and enjoyed an afternoon with them in downtown Santa Fe, which was only about a thirty minute walk. But our girls had made such good friends that morning at shul with the one other girl their age that we were invited to a *Seudah Shlisheet* (final Shabbat meal) at her family's house. So we headed there and caught the end of the meal and enjoyed *havdalah* with them. The families present all gave us great advice about touring Santa Fe and convinced us to stay an extra day, which was a great decision. On our way out the next day we even joined one of the young couples we had met that Shabbat morning in shul for dinner at a vegan restaurant and we now believe we truly have new friends in Santa Fe! Once again, we all felt touched by how welcoming everyone was and how willing they were to go out of their way to help us even though on personal level we were strangers to them.

Each of these experiences lead to a number of reflections which I will just leave out there for you now, mostly undeveloped, for the sake of time. My first insight: it is clear to me that the communal/familial aspect of being a Jew is one of our greatest, often underappreciated or overly-taken-for-granted, strengths. Two, this familial bond between Jews that is often touted in speech and print, is real, alive and tangible in our synagogue communities -- it is not just a lovely concept

that can be eloquently invoked on the bimah; we experienced it first-hand. Three, positive community interactions leads to other positive Jewish experiences, which include ritual and spirituality. Being welcomed warmly at shul can lead to exploring the spiritual component of what takes place here. Four, while these congregations were so lovely, experiencing them also made me appreciate the jewel that is Beth El – the human resources here alone – you - and the strength of our community could not be matched by any of those lovely congregations we joined. And I know that we too would welcome in strangers just as they did. However, it never hurts to be inspired by other experiences we have. This trip made our family even more aware of the power of how we treat our guests and those in our midst whom we don't know. For the effect of such a kindness, the impact of warm hospitality, on the guest, can be profound and can even shape that person's feelings towards what it means to be a Jew, as it did for us.

I was always appreciative to God that I was born with this great identity but I take away from this trip a special gratitude for the gift of what it means to be a Jew. And I hope to use that gratitude as motivation to further strengthen my own efforts to sustain and improve our special community so that this great gift of Judaism that was given to me remains a vital, strong and dynamic force in the lives of Jewish people for centuries to come. It is great to be home! Shabbat Shalom!

Tetzaveh 2016: Lessons from the Road on Leadership in the Mishkan and in Revival of Jewry in Budapest – Rabbi Michael Schwab -2/20/16

(Written for speaking purposes only)

The pomp, circumstance and popularity of inauguration day in the United States has always interested me. The massive formal gathering outside the capitol, the assembled dais of dignitaries, the oath, the speeches, the poetry, the music – it is a grand and ritualized ceremony. And then there is a whole day of events that follow, including a Congressional lunch, a special prayer service and even a parade. The ritual that makes up this historic ceremony is majestic. To me it seems to convey a feeling of what I call “optimistic importance”. On the one hand it imbues the office of president, in the eyes of the public, with the significance that the position deserves and at the same time injects in that moment of transition a feeling of hope that the future this new leader will fashion will usher in great blessings.

In many ways, our Torah portion reflects a much more ancient version of such a ceremony. In *Tetzaveh* the Torah describes the *Kohanim*, the priests, consisting of Aaron and his sons, being readied for

their own inauguration day. In striking detail their dress and preparation are spelled out, including the breastplate whose stones represented each tribe the priest would soon serve. And then with a similar eye to specifics the Torah relates the mystifying inauguration ceremony that was held which includes a mixture of offerings, a purification rite involving water and blood, as well as an anointing with oil and an investiture of the key ritual garments that only the priest could wear. After a week of initiation and what seems like hours of offerings and ceremony, much of it in front of the assembled people, the priest was deemed ready to serve. An air of sacredness was thus attached to the priesthood through these rituals and a mood of anticipated positivity was projected onto the community.

While in each case, both modern and ancient, every ritual has its own particular meaning, the larger take away for me here is the importance that the Torah, and later Democratic governments, have placed on the sacred nature of the appointment of a leader. In both cases, when a person steps into such a role, that individual is required to

transform beyond him or herself into something more – into a figure that reaches beyond their individual limitations. And this transformation is imbued by the rituals of that society with a deep importance that is impressed upon that individual *and* on all of the people that person will serve. For the Torah knows that leadership truly matters and that great leadership has the potential to spur and sustain a positive trajectory for an entire people, in a way that cannot be accomplished without it.

And it is the notion of the importance of leadership that struck me when I visited Budapest, Hungary two and a half weeks ago with the Men's Federation trip known as Nachshon. In Budapest I was astounded by the type of leadership I saw in the Jewish community. Not only because their Jewish leaders seemed passionate, creative and charismatic but also because of their age. Typically the primary Jewish leaders here in the States are adults in their 30's at their youngest, and of course beyond. While there are always exceptions, and in almost every organization there is some form of young leadership development, the Presidents of synagogues, the chairmen of Federations, the Executive

Directors of organizations, are typically people in their 40's and above. Thus, what was striking to me was that the leadership in Hungary, with few exceptions, were the youngest adults: immediate post college, university students and sometimes even teens. What I learned was that, sadly for Hungarian Jewry, the generation of Jews between 30 and 60 are virtually unaffiliated and the generation in their 70's and beyond were decimated by the Holocaust through extermination by the Nazis, or if they survived, their Jewishness was practically erased through communism and assimilation.

Yet, Jewish life in Budapest now is experiencing a revival nonetheless, and that revival comes from inspirational leadership – from those of the youngest adult generation. This revival enacted by these young leaders with the help of the leadership of world Jewry, especially in Israel and the US, fascinated me, inspired me and has given me hope for the Jewish future in that part of Europe.

There is a reason for this phenomenon of young leadership and Jewish revival, of course, and it has to do with Hungarian Jewish

history. Before the Holocaust there were almost a million Jews in greater Hungary. In many ways, similar to Germany, Jews were integrated into the larger national society. Yes, there was periodic anti-Semitism, sometimes light, sometimes not so light, but leading up to WWII, the Jewish community in Hungary felt a part of the Hungarian nation and they felt secure. Further the *Jewish* nature of the community flourished as well. There were great institutions of learning, well-known scholars who lived there and there was a thriving Hasidic and Orthodox religious life. Beyond that Hungarian Jewry even created its own movement of Judaism, called Neologue, which sought to retain much of the sacred tradition but also sought to modernize Judaism in form and style. By the way, their similarity to Conservative Judaism, which developed independently, has since lead Neologue institutions in Hungary to officially join the Conservative movement, including the famous Dohany Synagogue, which for most of modern Jewish history was the largest synagogue in the world, as well as a Rabbinical seminary. Further as many of you know Theodore Herzl grew up there and there was a thriving Zionist movement as well.

Another unique facet of Hungarian Jewish history is that the Holocaust qua Holocaust did not really reach Hungary until very late in the war. When the Hungarian government decided to ally themselves to the Nazis early-on certain discriminatory laws were put into place. However, because the Hungarian government maintained control of their own affairs as an ally, relatively few Jews were deported to concentration camps and even less were killed, all the way up until April 1944, less than a year before the war ended. While hundreds of thousands of Polish, German, French, Austrian and other Eastern European Jews were being murdered between 1939 and 1944, the Hungarian Jewish community remained relatively safe. Internally there was little motivation to adopt the Holocaust and the Nazis were primarily interested in using Hungary to fight on the Eastern front with the Soviets.

However, when Germany sensed in early 1944 that Hungary was seeking to leave the Axis and seek detente with the Allies, Germany invaded Hungary in March of 1944 seizing control of the government.

The SS and the Holocaust soon followed the invasion and the once remarkably intact Jewish community was soon under attack. By April the Jews were ghettoized and marked with the star of David. Then the true horrors began: from May to July of 1944, three months, **435,000** Jews were deported to Auschwitz mostly from the countryside and suburban areas *outside* of Budapest. By July another 20,000 were deported from Budapest itself. In an act of conciliation to the Allies, the Hungarian leader Horthy ended deportations but the Nazi Hungarian Arrow Cross party seized control and deported 70,000 more Jews by foot to Austria and then they themselves murdered another 15,000 along the banks of the Danube through January 1945 when the Allies finally seized control. Of the over 700,000 Jews that lived in Hungary in 1939 at the outbreak of the war, well over 500,000 were murdered in the last seven months. As I shared with some folks since my return, each time I hear the story of Hungarian Jewry and how far they made it into the war before the Holocaust hit them full force, I keep hoping and thinking that maybe the end of the story will change the next time I hear it. Sadly that is obviously not the case. The only mitigating and important result of

the fact that the Holocaust came to Hungary late was that a core element of the Jewish community, who lived in Budapest, survived, as a unit, preserving at least some continuation of Jewish community and Jewish communal institutions there. The population was devastated but the center of Hungarian Judaism in some form survived.

Sadly though, soon after the war Hungary became communist and whatever Jewish identity that had been preserved there was further repressed by the Soviet Union's policy against organized religion. Survivors who stayed rarely acknowledged their Judaism and the next generation grew up either not even knowing they were Jewish or perhaps having a vague notion that they had Jewish ancestry but little else beyond that. Thus the vast majority of a whole generation plus - those born in the 50,'s 60's and 70's - had little connection to Judaism, making what was at one time a thriving hub for Jewish life a mere shell of its former self.

But when the Iron Curtain fell and Hungary began to become a more democratic place, open to the world community, things began to

change. Great organizations like the Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel, supported by Federations like JUF Chicago, suddenly had access to this community whose latent Jewish community still numbered roughly 100,000 Jews. Slowly infrastructures were built: a JCC, an Israel Center, an Eastern European Jewish summer camp called Sarvash. Most of the outside leaders who came in were young Israelis and Anglos, and when they reached out they found that other than the elderly who were grateful for the services offered to them, it was the younger generation that reached back. Pre-teens, Teens and University students that barely knew they were Jewish were suddenly offered Jewish camp, activities at the Israel center and trips to Israel itself. This process was accelerated tremendously when Taglit Birthright was initiated and extended to Eastern European Jews. Suddenly young Jews who barely knew they were Jewish were signing up for a free trip to Israel. We met a host of young Jewish leaders in Budapest and almost all of them had gone on Taglit Birthright which they cited as their inspiration for re-connecting with their Judaism. Many of them had also attended the Jewish summer camp at Sarvash,

which they credited for building within them a proud positive connection to their Judaism. These Jewish institutions were literally growing Jewish leaders in way no one could have ever anticipated.

What we heard from these young people were amazing stories of the rediscovery of their lost Jewish heritage and the rebirth of a vibrant young Jewish community in Hungary. One university student we met discovered *for himself* his Jewish ancestry through a school project on genealogy; his parents had never bothered to inform him that he was Jewish and it came as a total surprise. Instead of eschewing this new-found information, he embraced it as a revelation, connected with the Jewish community in Budapest that now had growing Jewish institutions, participated in a mentors program with Holocaust survivors, met a young Jewish woman and claims that because of the influence of the recent discovery of his Jewish heritage he was now choosing a career in social services to help those who were on the fringes of society. Young Jews are creating new *minyanim* (prayer communities), running activities through JAFI and the Israel center, studying Hebrew and

creating a burgeoning Jewish community there. Children are now growing up with older siblings that have already gone to Jewish camp, participated in youth group, and/or traveled to Israel and they are following in their footsteps. From the devastation of the Holocaust and the repression of the communist era, renewed Jewish life is growing.

I am not claiming that the experiment in Hungary has a guarantee of success. We are not sure if this revival will be sustainable, whether these young adults will marry Jewish in significant enough numbers, raise Jewish children in significant enough numbers and therefore give birth to a new generation of Hungarian Jewry. There are many obstacles, including the prevalent anti-Semitism in the current culture there, the right wing government that certainly harbors classic anti-Semitic beliefs and even more so the growing fascist right wing party that is openly anti-Semitic. The impulse to acculturate and assimilate is still very strong in their society and the percentage of engaged Jews is still relatively low.

Yet what I see is a new generation of leaders being formed. In essence, they have metaphorically been anointed and anointed themselves with the mantle of responsibility for the stewardship of Judaism in their country. As of yet, they have not been given the same pomp and circumstance for their efforts and for the great responsibility they have taken on, on behalf of their community, but if Judaism is going to flourish again in Hungary it will be because of these leaders supported by the resources of world Jewry at large through our Federation system and the government of Israel. While it may not be as dramatic and obvious as inauguration day, in the face of anti-Semitism in many parts of Europe and the shrinking Jewish communities there, I truly see the inauguration of a new generation of leaders in Hungary and the possibility for a new era of Judaism in that part of the world.

However, witnessing this phenomenon not only gave me great hope for Hungarian Jewry it also reminded me of the preciousness of my own Judaism which I, of course, live out here in the United States. Those young leaders reminded me again and again not to take the

bounty of my Jewish tradition and my ability to engage with it freely, for granted. There was no external advantage for them to identify as Jews in Hungary , beyond that initial free trip to Israel, but from what they say and learned about our heritage they wanted it anyway. My engagement with these young Hungarian Jewish leaders, therefore, has inspired me, and I hope will inspire you, to remain committed to Jewish causes and to take advantage of the myriad ways that Judaism can certainly add meaning to our lives. I saw through their eyes that Judaism is precious and worth embracing even at a cost. Thus I am reminded that all the more so here in the United States when it costs us almost nothing at all, that we should be embracing our Judaism with both passion and love.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s will. Shabbat Shalom, Amen.