

## Growing into Torah

Rabbi Megan GoldMarche (RS '14), Executive Director, Tribe 12



Ice breakers and Torah are two of my favorite things. At my Shabbat dinner table each week, I come up with a question related to the parashah that encourages guests to consider the relevance of Torah to their daily lives and to share something personal and brief. For example, for this week's parashiyot, Behar-Behukkotai, I might ask: What is something that you took or borrowed from someone that you know it is time to return, perhaps because it is the right thing to do or because it will make you feel lighter? This can be a physical thing like a book or shirt, or something intangible like the hope or support you received from someone. If you are hosting shabbat dinner this week I encourage you to try it out, with a brief explanation of the ideas of [Jubilee and returning land](#) to its original owners that appears in this week's parashah.

Now I should not have needed to review the parashah to come up with this question because in May 1997, Behar was my bat mitzvah portion. And yet every year when these parashiyot come around, together or separately, I feel a bit of shame. I do not remember chanting the words or studying them. I do not remember if they spoke to me or what I said about them from the bimah.

What I do remember is Cantor Brindell, of blessed memory, who went into the hospital in the hours after my service and died on Shabbat morning the following week, teaching me the trope for the haftarah. I remember its opening words, "וַיֹּאמֶר יְרֵמְיָהוּ הִנֵּה דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר" And Jeremiah said that the word of God came to him saying . . ." (Jer. 32:6). I remember being so proud to lead a service in front of my family, friends, and all the other middle schoolers I invited to the service. I remember relatives coming in from near and far, and I remember my mom on the bimah speaking to me in her official role as synagogue president.

And so I find myself 26 years later, 9 years into my rabbinate, going back to the words that I must have studied with the rabbi, trying to figure out what messages I forgot, or missed, all those years ago.

Reading through it, I can see why the portion didn't quite speak to me. Slavery and the creation of a slightly more moral system than the norm in the ancient world are major themes. I suspect my pre-teen self said, "I guess Torah is sort of outdated" and moved on. Rereading it today, I can easily notice relevant concepts such as *shemittah*, giving the land a Shabbat-like rest, and the jubilee year when we return land to folks who have become disenfranchised and prevent systemic inequality. These concepts are relevant to me today because observing Shabbat has given shape to my week, the year I spent observing [a modern shemittah with JTS classmates](#)<sup>1</sup> shaped my relationship with the origins of my food, and learning about systemic injustice has shown how radical the return of land could be. I do not blame the educators, because while I did not receive the message that my Torah portion was filled with relevant wisdom, I received a more important message loud and clear: Judaism, its people, culture, and rituals, are deeply meaningful and relevant. The friendships, the cycle of holidays, the marking of time, I never once questioned that my life had more joy and meaning because I was part of the Jewish people.

Today I meet many young people who have not been taught Judaism's relevance to their lives. They have not had the chance to live the Jewish calendar, to build strong Jewish friendships, to feel pride in belonging to something

---

<sup>1</sup> This blog post written by Rabbi Ariella Rosen (RS'15) for a JTS class assignment describes what it was like..

that sets them apart from others and knowing what beliefs or behaviors set them apart.

In my work as a community rabbi, first at Hillel and now leading a Jewish community organization for 20s and 30s in the Philadelphia area, I have taken on the mandate to convey this message: that Judaism is relevant, exciting, and meaningful—not just as an identity that they can name but as a way of life that shapes the choices they make and how they spend their time. Teaching the words of the Torah in one-off and ongoing classes is one way we do this. We also model the values of *shemittah* and jubilee, such as giving time for self-care, running programs on environmentalism, and pushing for economic justice. We try to make the Jewish calendar accessible and fun through holiday celebrations. And we hope that if one of the young people we serve is in trouble, they will turn to each other, as our parashah models: “If one of your kin is in straits and has to sell part of a holding, the nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what that relative has sold” (Lev. 25:25).

In my 20s I led a lot of Birthright trips and each trip would have 5–10 folks who decided to have an adult b’nei mitzvah ceremony on the trip. I would often say, too many people see the b’nei mitzvah as the end of Jewish education, and as the pinnacle of Jewish living. 12 or 13 is too young for that, and so are 18 or 22 or 25. There is no age which should serve as the culmination of our Jewish education. If we are lucky we will have the chance to go back to each parashah and holiday for decades, noticing new things about the texts and rituals, and about ourselves and our communities each year.

This is one of the biggest blessings of our calendar, the chance to go back year after year to the same texts and rituals and continuously analyze, critique, and celebrate these gifts of the Jewish inheritance. In this week’s second parashah, Behukkotai, the Torah shares some of the blessings and challenges of our covenant with God and states “I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). What a gift to have our entire lives to connect with God’s presence in new ways, through text, community, and practice, in our ever-renewing commitment to God’s everlasting covenant.