

D'Var Torah Delivered on Shabbat, August 19, 2022

Paying Your Privilege Forward

Good evening and Shabbat Shalom. It is my honor to deliver the D'Var Torah this evening. Let me introduce myself. I am Sharon Stiefel, your Director of Social Impact and Community Engagement here at Westchester Reform Temple. I am a white, Jewish, cisgender, heterosexual, woman, mother, and wife.

I also love Broadway, and I recently had the privilege of seeing one of my favorite musicals, *Into the Woods*. Consider the stories of Cinderella and the Baker.

Cinderella wants to go to the festival at the castle. However, Cinderella's wicked stepmother and stepsisters will not allow her to go. Cinderella has done nothing wrong; rather she does everything asked of her. Yet, because of circumstances beyond Cinderella's control - the death of her mother and the remarriage of her father - she is treated as less than and not permitted to join the other people at the castle.

The baker and his wife are unable to conceive a child. They learn from the witch that she placed a curse on their lineage because the baker's father stole magic beans from her. The Baker is being punished for the choices of his father; the repercussions of his ancestor's history fall upon the baker and his wife.

And so, along with the other well known fairy tale characters, Cinderella, the Baker and his wife go off into the woods in search of their wishes; or put another way, they go off to try to get their "wish" despite their current circumstances for which they do not have responsibility.

This week's Torah portion is called *Eikev*. It's the third portion in the Book of Deuteronomy. The Israelites have been wandering the desert for 40 years and have finally come up on the border of Canaan, the promised land. Moses is telling the Israelites what they must do to enter the land and to receive the favor of G-d.

Moses warns the Israelites that they must abide the rules of G-d even after entering the land. And if they do, G-d will make sure that their lives are bountiful and that they lack nothing. In addition, G-d has promised to rid Canaan of the people currently living there.

Moses explains, "It is not because of your virtues and your rectitude that you will be able to possess their country; but it is because of **their** wickedness that the Eternal your G-d is dispossessing those nations before you..." (9:5) (emphasis added). We know that the Canaanites were idolaters. But, at times so were the Israelites. We do not know the Canaanites' story, or the story of their ancestors. Nor do we know whether they were given opportunities to atone, at least not until this moment when Moses addresses his people.

Instead, we learn that the Israelites were given chance after chance to choose a better way, to choose to follow G-d, but fail, time and again. Moses reminds the Israelites that they must “never forget” that they have been “defiant toward the Eternal” since they left the land of Egypt (9:7) recounting the way in which the Israelites themselves provoked, defied, and angered G-d (9:7). Yet, the Israelites were given the opportunity to right their wrongs and still be rewarded by G-d. G-d never deserted the Israelites, despite their wrongdoing, even when they were wandering the desert; the Eternal provided them with manna and water and ensured that their clothes would remain clean and their feet would not swell. This is the essence of Moses’s stern speech to the Israelites.

So, here I am... the Director of Social Impact and Community Engagement at WRT. And I read these words of Torah and begin to wonder: why the Israelites? We admit they are imperfect. We admit that they make mistakes. And yet they are given repeated opportunities to prevail and eventually are led into the promised land.

I began this evening with Cinderella and the Baker wandering the woods having to reckon with the consequences of choices made by those who came before them. And now we are here with the Israelites who are ultimately given redemption because of a promise made between the Eternal and their ancestors. Moses tells the Israelites, “Remember that it is the Eternal your G-d who gives you the power to get wealth in fulfillment of the covenant made on oath with your fathers...” (8:18). Repeatedly it is said that the reason is because of the covenant that G-d made with their **ancestors**. Not with them; their ancestors. In neither story are the current individuals’ virtue or goodness ultimately the deciding factor. If they were, we would certainly find the Israelites’ behavior much more wanting than that of Cinderella or the Baker, to say nothing of his wife who just married into this mess. (Families, amirite?)

I am going to suggest to you that the reason that Israelites have been given these opportunities, have defied the Eternal and yet been forgiven time and again, is because the Israelites have been granted a position of privilege. And I note, as does Moses, that their privilege is not derived from the actions of these Israelites, but by the covenant made between the Eternal and their ancestors.

Let’s be honest, naming “privilege” makes many of us not only feel uncomfortable, but also leaves many of us feeling blamed. But I invite you to start getting comfortable with the word.

Privilege is a special right or advantage granted to a particular person or group based on aspects of one’s identity. Such aspects can include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, geographical location, ability, and religion, to name only a few. But privilege is not stagnant. A person may experience privilege as a result of one aspect of their identity under one circumstance, whereas the same person may be marginalized due to another aspect of identity under a different circumstance.

Privilege also does not mean we should be blamed for what we have, or that we did not work hard for what we have achieved, or that we have not overcome hardships. We know that the Israelites, although in a position of privilege, suffered and overcame challenges: they were slaves in Egypt and forced to roam the desert for forty years. The privilege was that they were benefiting from a covenant that they did not themselves earn, but was made for them by their ancestors.

Each one of the *Into the Woods* characters, despite their personal wishes and struggles, also has their own privilege in comparison to the others. While the Baker and his wife cannot conceive, they have a home and a business. Comparatively, Jack and his mother cannot afford to eat, and yet Jack's mother has the son she wanted. Cinderella is treated as a servant in her own home. But she has food, a home, and in the end the protection of a fairy godmother, as one may in a fairytale.

This evening I introduced myself as a white Jewish cisgender heterosexual woman, mother, and wife. Some of these identities I was born with; some I chose. I derive privilege from being white, cisgender, heterosexual, and married and disadvantage at times from being a woman, a Jew, a mother and a wife.

So what do we do with the privilege we have? This should be the operative question. In this Torah portion, Moses warns the Israelites to "beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Eternal your G-d." (8:14). What do we take from this? Perhaps the takeaway ought to be: Do not be ashamed of the good things you have or that you may have more than others. Rather, name that privilege, and use it to pay it forward - do good in this world. Do not be haughty, be generous.

I challenge each of you to think of ways to pay your privilege forward. Next Wednesday, August 24, we are gathering from 10:30 - 12:30 to write postcards encouraging underrepresented and marginalized communities to register to vote and vote in their primaries. If you are interested, grab a flyer on your way out. On August 29, at 10 am we will be gathering in the WRT kitchen to make hot meals for HOPE Community Services in New Rochelle. These are just two examples of opportunities through which you can make an impact here at WRT. Be sure to visit the WRT website, which has an upcoming opportunities page on its Impact section. Together, we can be impactful, be mindful, and be just. Shabbat Shalom.