

## Shabbat Va'etchanan Sermon 5777

On behalf of my wife Lisa and our children Celia, Max and Zachary, I want to thank the members of this community for the many blessings you have already bestowed upon us. Every step in the process of our coming here has been marked with kindness, thoughtfulness and warmth. I don't want to single anyone out, for fear of forgetting someone, but you should all know that the efforts of the Board of Directors, the co-Presidents, the Rabbinical Search Committee and the new Rabbinic Transition Committee have made our move to EBJC a joyful one. I would especially like to thank those community members who responded to a late call to help prepare the parsonage house in advance of our arrival. In rapid fashion they turned an underused house into a lovely home. We are very happy to be here, and we so appreciate the many calls, messages and invitations that have marked our arrival.

And for me, this week means something more. I have travelled all around the country over the last few months, teaching, preaching and talking to several communities, and fearing that I would not succeed in finding a position at all. To stand here today and be called rabbi by all of you is in no small sense a feeling of redemption. It is in some ways comparable to how our ancestors must have felt at this point in the story the Torah has been telling us. The Israelites escaped from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and are now on the cusp of entering the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and Sarah centuries before. As they do, Moses recounts the events that have brought them to this moment, the many challenges that the people have faced during the wilderness years, including, this week, his reiteration of the laws given at Mount Sinai and the words that would later be remade into the first section of the Shema. So much had happened to bring that community to that point and, similarly, so much has

occurred in EBJC's history to bring us together at this crucial moment. Like the Israelites, we stand at a crucial turning point in our shared story.

There is an old joke about a shul in which an ongoing dispute seems never to resolve: Some say that the custom is to remain seated during the full kaddish; others say that the custom is to rise. Unable to resolve the argument, the president of the shul goes to its oldest member, now in assisted living. "Saul," the President pleads with him, "Tell me, in the old days, was it the minhag for everyone to sit during kaddish?" "No," he replied "that was not the tradition." "Was it the minhag for everyone to stand during kaddish?" "No," he repeated, "that was not the tradition." "Saul," the president pleads, "you have to help me. Half the congregation sits, half the congregation stands, everyone is up in arms, there are fights, it's a terrible balagan!" Saul replies: "That was the tradition." Differences in customs and understandings of *halakha* (Jewish law) go back all the way to the beginning. How to live as a Jew has been as varied as the number of places Jews have lived and the number of opinions the sages and the community at large have held. It should be a source of pride that we continue to disagree about how to do things; it shows a healthy attachment to Jewish tradition and a deep concern for the Jewish future.

What will guide us now with our own differences of opinion are the same things that guided us since the time of Moses: A commitment to the shared history, experiences, rituals, values and yes, the God whose demands bind us one to another. The values embodied first in *aseret hadibrot* (the Ten Commandments) and in the words of the Shema established a new mode of living and thinking, through which we acknowledge God's creation of the world and our place in it as God's children, subject to the divine command, and as God's partners in caring for a sometimes broken world, and for each other. So long as we remember these principles, the

years ahead will be filled with joy and achievement, regardless of the specific path we take toward that future.

When we examine the language of *aseret hadibrot* and Shema, we can find a key to maintaining tradition and simultaneously evolving it into a contemporary form of Judaism that is yet rooted in tradition. This has always been the Jewish way. These two texts are addressed to people as a whole, to the Israelites in their time and to us in ours. They teach us to be loyal to God, to treat parents with respect, to observe Shabbat and to maintain the well-being of other people's families and property. The Torah provides many more details, of course, but these are the basic features that underlie them all: Treat God and other people with the same respect we wish for ourselves. All the rest, as Hillel the elder put it, is commentary. But the way that God expresses these values in the Torah, both in *aseret hadibrot* and in Shema, is through the use of the second person singular: Not *atem*, "All of you" but rather *atah*, "You" as an individual.

What that means is that while those values are obligatory on all of us, each synagogue, and each individual can find different ways to live them out. That variety of practice is borne out hundreds if not thousands of times in the Talmud, where the sages argued over every imaginable facet of Jewish thought and behavior. "Observe the Sabbath," this week's parsha reminds us. But how? From when until when? What do we do or not do, and with whom, and where? The Torah is silent on most of the details; the sages of the Talmud argue those details but rarely establish definitive rulings; the rabbis of the middle ages and modernity continue to argue over the meaning of what we might otherwise imagine are long-settled topics. Judaism's vitality derives from the never-ending argument over what things mean, case by case, day by day, shul by shul. "We have always done it this way" is an insufficient answer to whether a practice remains in

place, and so too “I don’t like it” is insufficient to uproot a long-held tradition. The path toward truth runs through God’s demands upon both community and individuals. It is only by talking, arguing, convincing and innovating that we approach what remains true to tradition even while we change our expression of that tradition. I will worry most about our shul, and about Judaism, when we stop disagreeing. That will be a sure sign of stasis, stagnancy and a tradition whose rituals and symbols have withered to the point where no one cares enough to question.

I have come here to be your rabbi, to teach, to preach, to celebrate and to comfort. But I will need your help. In this new chapter of the story we write together, you will need to step up and take part in the ongoing conversation about ourselves. Who are we? What do we believe? How do we express our values? Who needs help? What can each of us do to lift up another person, learn a new Jewish skill, master a Jewish text? These are communal responsibilities, easily traceable to Shema and *aseret hadibrot*, but they are achieved one person at a time, as each of us responds to the divine command in our own way. Torah is addressed to us as a people; we respond as individuals.

There are challenges ahead. I want to get to know each member of EBJC by face and name. My goal is for our synagogue to be a destination and a home for different kinds of Jews, who may disagree but will always treat their differences with respect. I pray for us all to draw upon the inspiration and the patience that we will need to grow our shul and become a leading center for Jewish education, celebration and friendship in the years to come. I commit myself to working to renew our shul as well as our connections to one another, to our sacred tradition and to God. Just as you have redeemed me, I want to help you find *geulah*, redemption, in a thousand

different ways. As we begin this journey together, I once again thank you and wish you a Shabbat shalom.