

Shabbat Shalom Friends,

It is an honor to address you on this Shabbat Shuvah or Shabbat T'Shuvah, and The Shabbat that honors couples who have been married for 50 years or longer. The name Shabbat Shuvah comes from the first word of the [Haftarah](#) that is read on this day, (Shuvah) and literally means "Return!" It is alternately known as Shabbat T'shuvah owing to its being one of the Aseret Y'may T'shuvah (Ten Days of Repentance)/Shabbat of Repentance, the Sabbath in between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Growing up, I heard many Dvar Torahs that mainly addressed the repentance side and so tonight my choice is to look at how returning often means that we come back to the same situation with new perspective and to position ourselves in the experience of the other, just as we do when we say that we were enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt at our Passover Seder.

I think there is an interesting connection here. What I've known in my relatively new marriage is that there are always at least two ways of meaning (my husband's and mine) and often we're both looking at the same thing quite differently. This can create tension and conflict. Yet, it can also create depth, connection, and growth. For example, we can either debate and choose one translation from the Hebrew, or we can accept the richness of perspective, that come from any number of possibilities, translation, and interpretation. Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Return. And Shabbat T'Shuvah. Sabbath of Repentance.

Presently, we are living in a time of chaos, politically, environmentally, economically, etc. Our ancestors too, were experiencing chaos in our weekly Torah portion. They have been wandering through the desert and now they learn that Moses will not be going with them. It seems fitting that we have a dramatic plot twist around the High Holidays. This week's Torah portion, Vayaleh, offers us some crucial tools for navigation to help us as we reflect on the next year; personally, in our close relationships, in our communities, and for our planet.

In Vayaleh, several major important moments in our history occur. First, Moses addresses the people Israel, letting them know that Joshua will be the one accompanying them into the land the people have been promised. Secondly, Moses receives G-d's teaching and Moses writes down this Teaching and hands it over to all the elders and the priests. Moses commands them, saying, "At the end of seven years, on the Festival of Huts, when all Israel comes to see itself directly before the Presence of G-d, you shall read this Teaching in the presence of all Israel." And Finally, G-d lets Moses know that the people will stray from worshipping G-d to worshipping foreign deities, and that it will appear as if G-d has forsaken the people. And so G-d gives Moses a song to teach to the people.

"Now, write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouth so that this song may become a witness for Me against them."

One of the main lessons of Vayaleh, is to find the both/and in ourselves, our relationships, and within our communities. It could be understandable for Moses to not support Joshua in this transition. It would be easy for Moses to doubt himself, to question his self-worth. And equally the same holds true for Joshua, but in this portion, we're invited to see two different styles of leadership, Moses and Joshua, for who they are and how they are both essential in the larger picture of our peoplehood. Joshua demonstrates a duality within his character that was missing from that of Moses. While Moses was primarily a spiritual leader, who acted as an intermediary between God and the Jews, Joshua was a capable military commander as well as a religious leader. By capturing the city of Jericho, and, eventually, the rest of the land of Canaan, Joshua shows that his leadership is different from that of Moses. The characteristics that I love in Joshua are his optimism and vision, which he displayed in his scouting of the land. He and Caleb believed they could defeat their enemies while the other ten scouts gave a negative report. Now more than ever, I believe we need the power of optimism in our own lives. Joshua's leadership reflects the new reality that the Israelites encounter in their new homeland: In the desert, where

their needs were provided for by God in a steady flow of miracles, a purely spiritual leader was sufficient. Now, with their destiny in their own hands, the Jews need a more practical, physically capable leader.

Perhaps this is a metaphor for our own lives. To honor our various selves and the changes that evolve in human relationships over the course of our lives. To acknowledge that what served us in the past, may not be the choice we need for the present or the future. To know that we will always be making mistakes and making amends, and to be kind to ourselves and each other. I believe this is why G-d offered a song and commanded a gathering every 7 years, to offer our ancestors a way to reconnect both personally and collectively to community and our highest selves. I think it is also a very important reminder in these times when we feel personally, emotionally, politically, or spiritually hopeless, we're reminded that even when it appears that G-d is not with us, G-d is within us. Or even when it appears we are disconnected from each other, we have the ability to return to each other. It is something I have often felt in prayer, knowing that so many others before me and at the same time as me, are doing the same thing. As many of you were hearing the shofar in temple on Monday, it rang through my kitchen where I was streaming services as Ruthie napped. My heart blossomed in sound, tendrils of vines reaching towards my sleeping daughter, towards all of you, back towards our ancestors whose hearts also vibrated in the pulse of a call so primal, so whole, and so pure in its temporal and eternal call, and forward to those who have not yet blossomed into being.

As we look towards the new year, Vayaleh reminds us to look towards more inclusivity and accessibility in the year to come, to see the bigger picture, and that song and poetry are forces that can help us make the bridge from me to we, from forsaken, to remembered, comforted, and connected.

In my own marriage, I find that when I focus on the either/ or instead of both/and, I'm often in a rougher, more isolated spot. I'm unhappy, annoyed, and I turn away from my husband. I'm in a place of judgement

and I'm not in a place of looking at our relationship with compassion and generosity. The most important question I've learned to ask myself is: am I more invested in winning a fight or making things better, because, when we cling to our own meaning and perspective too tightly, we rob ourselves of the blessing of connection.

In Vayelech, there is a mandate for the community to gather every 7 years to study the Teaching. And it is all people, regardless of gender or age. I think now more than ever, the notion of ALL is so important. And I think this is a great question to ask ourselves, how can we make what we do more accessible and inclusive? I never realized the importance of streaming services until having a baby. Before this, I wouldn't have thought this would be something my demographic could use. We all have our own blindnesses and biases. Accessibility and inclusivity asks us to approach them with tender curiosity so that we can indeed find a way to support the whole ALL of us.

I wonder about this Festival of Huts, were there travel scholarships to help those afford the journey, was there childcare provided, gluten-free and vegan options at this Festival? Was there a way to include those who could not travel? In some ways I jest here, but more importantly, did everyone care to be in conscious dialogue? Did they listen to each other with their hearts? Did they see themselves in each and every being that was there? Did they ask, how can I be more open, aware? Torah often gives us the spirit of intention, but it is up to us to carry out Torah as inclusive and equitable as we can. We would do well as we go forth into this new year to reflect, for whom is this easier to do, and for whom more difficult, and what can we do to support welcoming everyone to the conversations and the teachings.

One of the key elements of poetry is repetition. One of the key elements of learning is repetition. I watch my one year old daughter Ruthie delight in doing the same thing over and over again. And on this Shabbat that occurs in the days of Awe, we have the phrase, "Be Steadfast and Be Strong." This is what Moses says to the people about how they should

carry themselves into the Promised Land, what Moses tells Joshua, as he is about to embark on his new role, and what G-d also says to Joshua when giving him this duty. In the first context, Moses is focusing on spirituality, encouraging the people to have faith in G-d, that G-d will deliver them in their battles with other nations. He reiterates this to Joshua when he appoints him as his successor. I see this repetition as a bridge, connecting the past to the present and future. G-d also communicates this directly to Joshua, but this time the meaning shifts even more for me as Joshua is both a spiritual and military leader. In poetry, repetition evolves the meaning of a phrase. Joshua represents a shifting towards a physical embodied type of knowing, where the spiritual becomes more tangible.

In my role as a yoga teacher, I often use a mantra or a phrase to help me refocus my energy, to call myself back to an intention or goal, and I think this is a good lesson for us to do for ourselves at this time of year. Perhaps we want to borrow from Vayeleh, Be Courageous, Be Strong, or perhaps we want to reflect on what that looks like in our lives, or perhaps we want to author our own mantra that we can carry with and within ourselves for the next year of our lives.

Marriage, like prayer, like Torah, like community is about returning, to each other, to the vows we make, and it is about the repairs we need to make, as like our biblical ancestors, we will make mistakes, we will stray, and we will act opposite from our vows and our best intentions. And when we do, it is important that we have the strength and courage to acknowledge when we have not held up our part of the deal. And, it takes a strong and brave community to allow and thrive in the messiness that is being human. In yoga we have the phrase perfectly imperfect, and that is what I wish for all of us in the year to come, the sweetness of knowing ourselves and each other as we are, perfectly imperfect and being perfectly imperfect together.