

A View from the Mountain – Parasha Behar

This American Jewish Life

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By Jared Rubin

Shabbat shalom.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jared Rubin or Yakov ben Harav Moshe Y'hoshua. My wife is Penny Joy Salus and I'm the proud father of Tali Joy and Luis Osher. I have been a resident of Eugene since 1997 and I currently work as an Environmental Specialist for the Eugene Water and Electric Board.

I feel honored to stand before you today to tell you a little bit about my upbringing and my Jewish roots. Perhaps by the end of my talk you will have a better sense of who I am as an individual and what defines me as a Jew. The paths, traditions, and influences we have are so unique. We each have a story to tell – no one story more interesting or important than the next.

Over the course of my talk I'll attempt to weave in some references to this week's Torah portion, *Behar*, which literally means "on the mountain." I was told by Nina that I'd get bonus points for each reference to the Torah portion, so there you go. I'm a pretty competitive guy and I like scoring points.

This week's portion begins with the sentence "*Vayidaber hashem el Moshe b'har Sinai laymor*" – "and G-d spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai saying..." The Torah portion then launches into a discussion of *shmittah* which is the requirement that the land lie fallow once every 7 years. Every 50 years, or 7 cycles of *shmittah*, there is a year known as *Yovel* when we are supposed to abstain from working the land, free our slaves, and return properties that have been purchased to their original owners.

The parallels between the 7 year *shmittah* cycle and the Shabbat are obvious. For 6 years we work the land and then we let it rest. For 6 days we go about our normal busy routines and then we pause for a day to rejuvenate and reinvigorate our minds and bodies. But what is so special about the *shmittah* commandment, asks the Midrash *Sifra*? All 613 commandments originated "*bhar Sinai*" on the mountain. Why launch into a discussion of *shmittah* here – immediately after the reference to G-d speaking with Moses at Mt. Sinai? Stay tuned for one potential answer.

During Passover, we are encouraged to think of ourselves as if we personally came out of Egypt. By extension, perhaps we were also all present at Har Sinai - when Moses received the commandments. A second question for the evening then, is what journey did "this guy" take to travel from Har Sinai to Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, OR. What events, influences and life experiences defined me as a Jewish individual?

I was born in Washington, DC to a couple of transplanted New Yorkers. At the time of my birth, my dad was working for B'nai Brith in the same building that years later would be occupied by Hanafi terrorists. When my mom and dad met, my mom was working with the Hillel Foundation. They were married in Riverdale, NY on the hottest day of the year. I'm told that the air conditioner broke during the reception. For years my parents tried to start a family. After a series of unsuccessful pregnancies, they finally had me. My brother Michael came along three years later.

My dad was an interesting fellow with a varied resume. He was an ordained Rabbi, a Chaplain in the Navy, a minister at Sing Sing Prison (when the Rosenbergs were imprisoned there), an employee of Madison Square Garden, a Cantor, and a fund-raiser for the Jewish National Fund. Although he only led a congregation for a few years while living in Ossining, NY, he kept the title of "Rabbi Rubin" until his death in 1988. He was the Candy Man who came to shul every week with a talis bag full of treats for the kids. He was a huge sports fan with allegiances to the NY Giants, Rangers, Knicks and the Brooklyn Dodgers (until they moved out of Brooklyn to L.A.). We were one of the first families in the community to get cable television so we could watch all the home games. I think one of my Dad's proudest accomplishments was being able to amass 18 season tickets to the Giants when everyone else was stuck on the waiting list. For my dad it was all about connections, loyalty, and doing things the right way.

My dad grew up in Boro Park in a very religious family. His father was a lawyer who worked mostly for the synagogue located a few blocks from the family home. My grandmother was the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Norfolk, Virginia – the person in whose honor I was named. Most of my Dad's family still lives in Boro Park in the very same Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. That side of the family takes the biblical commandment of "*Pru urvu*" (to be fruitful and multiply) very seriously.

My mom, was born in the Bronx. She couldn't care less about sports but she still maintains the 18 season tickets for the Giants in honor of my dad's memory. Plus, she keeps hoping that I'll come home now and again to catch a game or two. Her family's "American experience" can be traced back to my great-grandmother, a woman affectionately known as "Little Grandma" who came over to the U.S. from Hungary alone as a 16 year old girl back in 1898. Legend has it that Little Grandma walked across Europe by herself to catch the boat to the U.S. She married a Polish widower and gave birth to 6 children – only two of whom survived into adulthood. Little Grandma's husband passed away when my grandmother, Hannah, was 6 months old but Little Grandma never remarried.

At the time, the family lived in the Lower East Side – Avenue C and 10th Street. Little Grandma provided for her two girls by cooking and serving meals, sewing, baking, taking in children and selling matzohs for the Horowitz Margareten company. Due to her work ethic, Little Grandma was able to bring her mother, sister and brother over from Europe and secure an apartment for them. I'm told that Little Grandma was a very proud and proper woman who never took any hand-outs and was very meticulous about doing things the "correct" way. Those traits were passed down from Little Grandma to Grandma Hannah to my mom, Renee. My mom is an

incredible woman who at 80 remains active, vibrant and fully engaged in her close-knit Jewish community.

When I was 7, my family moved from Washington, DC to New Jersey to be closer to family. My parents enrolled me in the Jewish Educational Center – a *yeshiva* in my home town of Elizabeth. Half the day was spent studying secular subjects like math, English and history while the other half was spent studying Hebrew, the Torah and the Talmud. I did well in school (or at least well enough) but something was wrong. Everything in my life seemed so structured. There was either a right way or a wrong way of doing something. Time and time again, I was told in school, and in the home, to behave a certain way without really understanding why. Why can't I toss a baseball on the Sabbath? Why can't we eat at that new restaurant? Why do I have to strap on my t'fillin and go to services twice a day. The response in just about every case was because G-d told us to, and that's what Orthodox Jews do. I went along for the ride, as would most any kid of elementary school age, but I secretly envied my less religious Jewish friends who could watch TV on Saturday, eat where and what they wanted to, and didn't need to wear a kippah on their head when they went out into the world.

After my bar mitzvah, my family decided to send me to another school. For me the choice wasn't between a public school and another yeshiva – it was between Yeshiva B and Yeshiva C. I was enrolled at Yeshiva University High School in Manhattan. During the week I lived in a dormitory on the YU campus and on the weekends I either went home to NJ or went to visit friends. The new environment didn't really change anything for me. I still did well (or at least well enough) but I continued to struggle with Orthodox Judaism. My observance felt meaningless to me – more like a survival mechanism than something that was done out of a heart-felt conviction. Even so, I enjoyed studying the Talmud and learning about the Jewish traditions. I clearly identified as a Jew – I just didn't feel comfortable with the degree of observance I was expected to maintain.

For years, I lived a double existence – behaving one way when I was at the Yeshiva or at home – and another way when I was on my own. This trend continued throughout college. It wasn't until I left NJ for good in the mid-80s before I could truly lead my own life. I'll never forget telling my parents some weeks before their first planned visit to my new home in San Francisco that I wasn't keeping kosher or observing the Sabbath. They cancelled their visit soon thereafter and never made it out to California in all the years that I lived there. My dad, to his credit, was actually full of compassion and empathy – telling me how he too had questioned and encouraging me not to give up too much of my observance. Out of respect for my mom, I won't delve into her response at the time.

For the next 10-15 years I must admit that my religious evolution was a bit stagnant. I dated Jewish women and celebrated some Jewish holidays but that was about it in terms of observance. In retrospect, I think I was allowing the pendulum to swing in the other direction. I clearly maintained my sense of identity as a Jew but it was very clear to me that I didn't want to observe Judaism, as I was raised to observe. For me, that fundamental conviction never wavered.

Those years, however, represented a period of tremendous personal growth for me. I was discovering who I was as an individual and what I wanted to do with my life. I taught Environmental Education in California, attended graduate school in upstate New York, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in South America and drove across the country looking for a place to call home.

The years on my own were good for me. During that time I was able to establish my independence from my parents and, when I was ready, reconnect with my Jewish roots – on my own terms.

Believe it or not, a defining moment for me was attending my first TBI service. A music lover all my life, I was incredibly moved by the melodies that Rabbi Yitz wove into the service. A rabbi who plays the guitar! You've got to be kidding. Women sitting next to men without a *mechitzah*? Wow! There were no "rights" and "wrongs" – or at least fewer of them – and lots of room for personal choices and expressions. At TBI I could bite off as much or as little as I wanted to in terms of observance. I found the community here to be incredibly welcoming and non-judgmental. I soaked it in like a breath of fresh air.

I can tell you now that I'm at peace with where I've landed. I'm comfortable with my sense of Jewish identity, my level of observance, and the way Penny and I are choosing to raise our kids. My mom comes to visit every 3-4 months and, to our credit, we have achieved a state of peaceful co-existence. We accept each other for who we have become and we no longer try to change one another.

Here in town, my family participates in two separate Shabbat groups – one comprised of 4 wonderful families, dear friends, many of whom are here today, and a second group, more focused on the children, that has been an effective way for us to expose our kids to the Jewish traditions. Our children feel comfortable here at TBI and we attend the Tot Shabbat services whenever we can. I'm proud to be part of the TBI community and very honored to be asked to share my story with you tonight.

So, let's revisit this week's Torah portion and the question posed by the Midrash Sifra. The Torah tells us that the *shmittah* year is a period of Shabbat for the land – during which we may not plant our fields or prune our vineyards. It is a year of rest for the land. But didn't **all** commandments originate at Har Sinai – why single out the laws of *shmittah* here?

For us, the rules of *shmittah* and *yovel* should help us remember that we merely inhabit the earth but ultimately, it's not ours or any other human's property. As individuals we are able to "borrow" land but ultimately we need to return the lands to the cycle of nature. According to the Ramban, the *shmittah* and *yovel* passages should serve as a reminder to us that we shouldn't think we are so essential. The world should not be a play thing for human beings and the vast array of organic living things serves a purpose higher than human whim.

What better place than a mountain top such as Har Sinai, to gain a sense of appreciation for the land and our relationship to it. The view of the landscape from a mountain's summit is unparalleled. From a vantage point in the clouds we can really appreciate the wonders of the

natural world, the bounties of our fields, our imprint on the land, and how small we humans are in the overall scheme of things.

The *shmittah* rules were designed to emphasize these very qualities.

I would encourage you all to climb mountains or buttes, as you are able, to view the world from a different vantage point. Honor the world you see. Try to minimize your footprint on the earth as you go about your daily business. Remember that we merely inhabit the earth but ultimately, it's not ours or any other human's property. Let's give the earth a rest now and again so it can continue to sustain us for generations to come. I think that is the message that the Torah had in mind when the laws of *shmittah* were passed down at Har Sinai from God to Moses to the Children of Israel.

Shabbat shalom.