

I want to take a moment to say how touched Jacob and I have been by the genuine outpouring of welcome that we have received in this community. On Wednesday, my first official day in the office, TBI resembled a florist shop – so many of you sent flowers. The cards waiting in my mailbox, with notes of encouragement, were so deeply moving.

There was something incredible about driving across the country to arrive here. We started in Manhattan just 2 and a half weeks ago, and drove three thousand miles, crossing cornfields and mountains, rivers and high desert – and finally the famous lava fields of the Mackenzie Pass – into the embrace of this community.

Now, here I am – your rabbi – when only a month ago I lived three thousand miles away, part of a distant and different community. Perhaps this stunning shift in community status made me particularly sensitive to a question of geography and status that shows up in our double Torah portion this week, Mattot-Maasei.

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In the first half of this week's double portion, Mattot, as the Israelite prepared to cross the Jordan River, two and half tribes; the Reubenites, Gadites and half of the tribe of Menasseh, seek permission to settle in land that the Israelites had already conquered East of the Jordan River. At first, Moses is infuriated that they would so separate themselves from the community, but Moses relents and allows this, once those tribes promise to help fight battles that will settle the rest of the Israelites west of the Jordan.

Then, In Maasei, the second half of the double portion, we receive an accounting of the borders of the ancient land of Israel. The piece that most caught my eye was the description of the eastern boundary, which runs along the Jordan river. In this description, nothing east of the Jordan - including the land inhabited by those two and a half tribes - is part of the land of Israel. With the eastern border of the land at the Jordan, the holdings of those tribes: the Reubenites, the Gadites and half of the tribe of Menasseh, are effectively not included in the definition of the land.

The 2.5 tribes had received permission to claim land east of the Jordan before the Torah laid out the boundaries of the land. So why didn't Moses, or God, adjust the boundaries of Israel to represent where the Israelites were actually living? Why start a nation with almost a quarter of its citizens, living just across the river, defined as outside of the national boundaries?

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Interestingly, the trend in traditional commentary has been to view those two and a half tribes chidingly, for choosing to live somewhere other than what God had designated as the holy land. Their perspective has been that the land of Israel is a fixed idea, whether or not all of the Israelites were living there.

According to the perspective of the sages, we shouldn't expect the boundaries of the land to conform themselves to the location of the people.

But we also cannot expect the location of the people to stay within the boundaries. From the very beginning, a quarter of the Israelites lived outside of the land of Israel. This comes to teach us something profound about the fallibility of boundaries.

It's not that borders are bad - they are necessary, as the Torah outlines this week. They were necessary to define, in order to set up the hereditary plots for inheritance; in order to know where Israelite agricultural law applied and where it didn't. Geographic boundaries are important and useful things.

But even a holy boundary, defined by God cannot encompass the whole community.

Maybe this fact: that even from the earliest moment of national definition, not all of us were in the land - maybe this has given us the strength for 2000 years of Diaspora; 2000 years of carving out a communal identity that is specifically not land based.

And so too, when we define our own communities, boundaries are necessary and useful - and inevitably they exclude. We, like the Torah, need to be aware of who is excluded.

As your new rabbi, I am here to serve the community of Temple Beth Israel.

Whom does that include? Well, we could say, and at times it is appropriate to do so, that the community is made up of those who show up. But then, there are those who need and love the community, who because of the demands of family or work responsibility, or their own health challenges, may be unable to physically show up.

We could say, and at times it is appropriate to do so, that those who pay dues are the members of TBI. But that fails to acknowledge the full membership of those who might be on dues relief of various kinds, or those who have been coming for years, and would be so delighted to pay dues, but because of their Jewish status cannot, according to current synagogue policy, officially be dues-paying members.

In fact, we need to acknowledge that none of our boundaries will ever fully define us. Our work as a community, and my work as a rabbi, is to be constantly moving beyond boundaries and radically welcoming those who fall outside of them.

This was Moses's work in this week's parsha. Even as we acknowledge the importance of borders, of definitions; this parasha teaches us to remember that some of our tribes, part of the very essence of our community, lived and will always be beyond them. If we want the fullest, truest description of our kehila kedosha, our holy community, we need always to be willing to examine the definitions we are using to define who is in, and who is out. To notice when a quarter of the people live beyond the borders, so to speak.

I'd like to take this one step further. Based on this parashah, the Reubenites, Gadites and half of the tribe of Menasseh played a crucial in establishing the Israelite people within those boundaries, even though they themselves would never dwell there. So if there is anyone here tonight who feels that you yourself are someone who falls "beyond the borders," please know that you are necessary to this entire communal undertaking. I want to hear from you. If there is work to be done, we are all needed to do it.

Shabbat shalom.