

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you all for being here this evening.

This Shabbat we study Parashah Bechukotai: Leviticus 26:3 -27:34. Here, we are at the very end of the book of Leviticus, with Moses still on Mt. Sinai talking with G-d about priests, holiness and purity. G-d is telling Moses that if the Israelites keep the covenant, there will be peace and tranquility. But, if they violate the covenant, there will be horrific curses, described in some rather gruesome detail, and including the ultimate punishment of exile from the land they were given. I am a visual person and the curses were difficult to read. I was taken aback by the volatile state of mind and the intensity of the fire of G-d's anger at imagined transgressions. I was shocked. And, so it would seem, was G-d because then comes a declaration of mercy, the statement that G-d's presence will remain with the Israelites even in the midst of their exile. That G-d will remember the covenant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and will not completely forsake them. It was from the darkness of what I perceived as G-d's exhaustion and frustration, anger and pain, and then a remembering of, and a returning to, the covenant where I found the orientation from this portion to my life.

Growing up, I never really thought about what comes after marriage and kids. I didn't think about a framework for dealing with the stresses of running a household, or raising children, or sustaining a marriage. I'd had some exposure to aging, illness and death, but nothing in my face and personal. When we moved to Eugene in 2005, I was on the cusp of a huge learning curve. Surviving that learning curve has given me the ability to empathize with, process, and grow from painful experiences. I am a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister, an auntie, a niece, a cousin, and a friend. I have numerous blessings. I also have scars. For those of you who don't know me, those who do will tell you, I lead with my heart. Living that way tends to result in frequent breaking of said heart. Finding my way out of the darkness that ensued after multiple traumas

including family illnesses, the transitions of relationships, the death of parents, and the death of a beloved sibling has been, and continues to be, an enormous evolution. Grief is a tortuous teacher. The agony of loss, whether tangible, or intangible, is a searing awakening to reality. By tangible I refer to the loss of a loved one, or a place/home/prayer space, or a job. An intangible loss would include loss of a relationship, or a dream, or loss of self-esteem.

While I've endured hardship and trauma, my life has, overall, been quite privileged and blessed. I am the 5th child born to a family of 5. There's a power to that position for me. My father was the 5th child in a family of 5, and I draw a tremendous amount of strength from that relationship. It was from my father that my very strong sense of Jewish identity stems. There has never been any doubt in my mind that I am a Jew. My name is as much Yehudite Tzirl Bat Golda v' Shulum, Bat Cohan, as it is Judith Cele Ostrach Hirsch. My father was extremely proud of the fact that his ancestors descended from the tribe of Aaron, and he took the rights, rituals and traditions of being Cohanim seriously. Growing up in the 60's & 70's, the structure of our home and of our family was very traditional and very conservative. Ours was a mid to upper middle class community in Ohio, with a high percentage of Jewish people. My father belonged to Park Synagogue from the time my parents settled in Cleveland until he died in 2017. Hebrew school was twice a week in addition to Sunday school. My education was extensive. But, none of that education ever suggested to me that I should actually ponder the concept of what living a Jewish life meant. Truthfully, the most Jewish part of my being did not come from the classrooms or the liturgy. At the core of my Jewish identity are my heart, and my soul. Kindness, compassion and a commitment to the principles of my faith define me. My father gave me a strong sense of Jewish identity, but, I attribute my goals for the content of my character to my mother, Gloria Ostrach, and growing up in her home, under her influence.

When I left Cleveland any consistent connection with the synagogue fell by the wayside. I did not consciously avoid it, but I did not consciously seek it out either. Connection would come at holiday times, usually gathered around a table, normally in my mother's house. The warmth of her home and the traditions therein brought our culture and heritage to life. Watching how my mother lived her life showed me the code of conduct that would be most empowering and fulfilling, I just didn't know it yet. As HaShem would have it, the friend that later became my partner and eventually my husband, now of 30 years, was, Jewish. My parents' expectation that I should marry within the faith was fulfilled, my in-laws liked me and I them, so we were good to go. The absence of a Jewish community was not impactful as we wandered through our 20's and 30's. We married under the Chuppah. Our sons each had a kosher Bris, and still the absence of a Jewish community did not feel impactful.

Wherever my mother was living remained my home ground, Jewish roots intact. It just so happened, that Gloria retired to Eugene, and this is where she was when my little family moved here. My brother had moved to Eugene many years before and they both naturally gravitated towards the Jewish community at Temple Beth Israel. There was no question in Gloria's mind that, in this particular community, we would find our home, as had she.

At the time, I thought marriage and childbirth were pretty big deals on the Life Cycle circuit. Turned out they were just the warm ups. I am extremely grateful we landed in this particular Jewish community. My life was about to hit a really rough spot, my coping mechanisms were questionable and I was going to need some sort of comfortable structure for processing the events to come. On one occasion, I remember Rabbi Yitzhak encouraging John and me to be

inspired looking for “gems” in the treasure box that is Judaism, to assist us in sorting through difficult feelings and circumstances. Not a message I'd heard before.

While I cannot give you an exact date, I most definitely can describe to you the scene during which I realized the connection between my Jewish heritage and my ability to survive, and thrive through, what was about to manifest. I was sitting on the floor next to my mother's chair. We were gathered for a TBI Sisterhood function at the home of Sandra & Gene Luks. My mom had been terminally diagnosed with cancer. Third strike, she was on her way out. She had just foisted the gavel of Presidency of the Sisterhood onto Sandra. We were gathered around her hearth for the afternoon's feature speaker, U of O professor of Asian Studies, Maram Epstein. The subject of her talk was, Filial Piety, which is a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders and ancestors as defined by Confucian and Chinese Buddhist ethics. As Maram's words washed over me, I realized, that the best way for me to move forward, live my life and contribute to the greater good, was to honor the values with which I was raised. To honor my mother and father. Returning to the values of Judaism was the course. The way to navigate that course was with the support of this TBI community and the framework within which we interpret our personal value and our contributions. My mother's death in 2008 was the beginning of a very challenging growth transition for me. The experience of losing her presence a mere 3 years after moving to the same town made me determined to be a better caregiver for my father as he first survived the death of his second wife and then fought his way to the end of his earthly journey through loneliness and illness. We lost my father in law in 2015 after his 20 year battle with Alzheimer's. 8 months before my father died in 2017, my older brother Louis died. His health hadn't been good for quite some time, but it was an unexpected death, he was only 65. It was a horrific time for our family. We lost a cousin, only 45 years old, and a dear uncle during that same year.

So, having some fuel for identifying with the darker parts of this portion, how does this segment relate to my returning to the rewards part of my life? How do I stay focused on the Blessings and not become overridden by the darkness? The answer lies, here, in my heart. I read several different teachings connected with this parashah and the ones that resonated most truly for me were penned by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. The sentiments I'm sharing below are summaries based on my perspective and thoughts.

A basic premise of this portion is reward and punishment. Stay faithful and be blessed. The result of faithlessness is defeat, devastation, destruction and despair. And yet, even though G-d punishes, G-d will not abandon the covenant. There is hope given at the end of the curses, that G-d will not break the covenant even if the people have transgressed to the point where they have been exiled. Returning to the covenant will redeem the people as G-d rejects punishment as absolute. So, how do we return to the covenant? Particularly if we're not sure we, personally, ever really left?

Whether we are scholarly, or more hearth oriented, I believe connection to a concept larger than ourselves encourages life, fosters the light and gives us strength. Faith, Hope, and Gratitude are powerful energies.

In another teaching, Rabbi Sacks points out that all Jews have a collective responsibility for one another. This is not necessarily a unique concept for a nation, but, in exile, or scattered all over the world as we are now, where's the sense of commonality, of a shared fate? How are we to feel connected?

We, identifying as Jewish, are connected by the covenant we made with G-d, and this binds us together as a nation. Our mutual responsibilities for each other, for humanity and for the Earth, keep us linked together. The connection to the covenant thus results in community.

This TBI community cultivates the caliber of character to which I, and my family, aspire. Here, I am challenged to reflect and adapt as I process all of the above, and more. I have been taught humility, tempered with the significance of honoring myself, and my self-worth, amid growth. Jewish identity has been a life line connecting me to the idea that our individual lives and our collective history have meaning. G-d is there even if I can't feel G-d. G-d hears even when I do not. That is the blessing. It gave our people the courage to survive some of the worst experiences conceivable, it continues to do so today. If not for the support and presence of this community, as well as the continuing practice of what have become my "gems", my comfortable rituals and traditions, I do not know that I would have survived the rough times feeling as confident and strong as I do. My connection to G-d encourages the light within me and gives me strength to share from a place of love and kindness, honestly, and from my heart. All I really want in this life, is to be a Blessing.

My Mom showed me the way, and my Dad assured me, I was.

Shabbat Shalom.