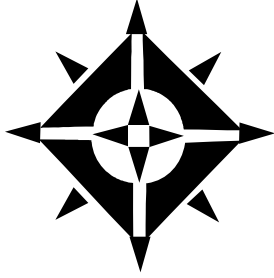


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Behar

**Temple B'nai Abraham
100th Anniversary Weekend**

**May 17, 2008
12 Iyar 5768**

27th Day of the Omer

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

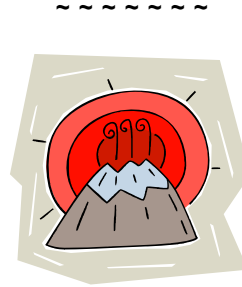
***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."



**Parashat Behar 5768
I'm a New Soul**

Bethany, when you read Torah on a fairly religious basis you become familiar with certain patterns in the text. One of the patterns that is most familiar to us is the opening to numerous paragraphs in which God speaks to Moses. We read "Vayidabeir Adonai el Moshe leimor..." We find the same phrase as the greeting to the third paragraph of the Shema that is recited twice each day. Given such familiarity, those of us who read Torah instinctively must do a second take when we come to the opening of the Torah portion for your Bat Mitzvah. Here we read: "Vayidabeir Adonai el Moshe beHar Sinai, leimor..." – "God spoke to Moses ON MOUNT SINAI, saying..." (Leviticus 25:1) So we ask of the text, "Why do we add the words "ON MOUNT SINAI"? What could these words possibly add to our understanding of the Torah that would not be recognized with its absence?"

Bethany, you and I know what follows, since we studied it together, is a description of what happens during the Jubilee year when freedom is declared throughout the land that God gave to our ancestors. To this day both the Seventh and Fiftieth years are observed in the land of Israel by the Orthodox as years when the land is allowed a Shabbat in the same way that people are instructed to rest every seventh day. However, what do these laws have to do with "Mount Sinai"?

To answer this question, I turn to Rashi, the premier commentator on the Bible for his insight into this question. He writes that it is important for us to understand that the laws of Sh'mitta,

letting the land rest, along with the laws of the Yovel, the Jubilee were both taught to the Children of Israel by Moses while they rested alongside Mount Sinai. These laws, the oral ones, are just as significant as the ones that Moses and God recorded by hand onto the tablets that were brought down from the mountain. What makes this message even more important on this day, Bethany, is that it occurs in the middle of a period of time when we are anticipating the anniversary of when the Torah was given to us and our ancestors on Shavuot.

Just as you have been counting the days until your Bat Mitzvah with great anticipation and excitement, as well as an element of dread and fear, the Jewish people engaged themselves in a similar count on the Second Day of Passover. As you know, Bethany, we have been engaged in a counting that has involved our keeping track of the days until Shavuot, which was mentioned in last week's Torah reading when the Torah told us specifically, "U'sefartem lakhem... You shall count..." During this time we have collected cereal boxes to represent the modern version of the ancient custom of bringing a measure of grain to the Temple in Jerusalem as a way of measuring our blessings each day of that count.

In the Torah reading for today, we read similar words that connect us to a different count. We read in Leviticus 25:8, "*V'safarta l'cha... You shall count*" the years toward the Sabbatical of the land as well as the years toward the Jubilee when all debts are to be forgiven, on the fiftieth year. The parallel cycle of seven times seven followed by a sacred fiftieth makes us stand up and take notice of the similarities between the two countings:

Both cycles are related to the agricultural working of the land.

Both culminate with a sacred day/year of rest at a point where there is a great deal of uncertainty. As spring develops there is a tremendous amount of fear regarding the rain and if falling in the right amount and at the right time as the seedlings develop and mature. Counting the days as we wait for the bounty of the land offers us a some security at a time when our emotions are heightened and our awareness that "the Land is the Lord's and all it contains, the Earth and all who dwell on it..." as we are reminded by the Psalmist (24:1)

On Shabbat we are freed from worry as we rejoice in the blessings that we take with us from the work week. We are sustained not only by the food that is placed before us on our tables, but also we are nourished by words of Torah, spiritual instruction for the soul. With the completion of each day our hopes are raised as we come ever closer to our goal of completing our count, and anticipate the joy of being in that moment of completion, whether it be the time of release from our economic worries in the year of the Jubilee, or the time of the harvest on Shavuot, or the day of your Bat Mitzvah and the last note of the blessings after the *haftarah* has been chanted. When we know that we have worked diligently towards making this moment special is when we realize the purity of emotions that come with being BeHar Sinai – on Mount Sinai."

Bethany, I know that the soul has become a very important part of your plans for this day, not only the one that is inside of you that has released its brilliance upon us today as you stood on this *bimah* earlier, but also the sole of a different kind, the one that we walk on. As you mentioned in your *d'var torah*, the project that you have chosen to help accentuate the importance of this day, is to give soles to those who go through life without them. You are to be commended for your efforts to give these disadvantaged children and young adults a sole to stand on – in both its meanings (soul and sole).

As you are aware, Bethany, I chose a special gift for each young adult who comes before the congregation in celebration of this momentous event in your life. My gift to you, Bethany, is "A New Soul", the one that Steve Jobs fell in love with when he wanted to promote his latest computer achievement. It is the title song to Yael Naim's latest album, in which this Israeli woman sings about being a new soul who has come into the world to learn, in her own words, "about give and take." One of the lessons that she learns, and one that you can relate to, Bethany, is she finds that things are harder than they seem.

I know that you and your classmates have listened to her song at least a million times, including the time that I shared with you my own CD. However, it isn't until I started writing my *d'var torah* to you that I had a chance to see the

video that she made to go along with this song which hit as high as Number 7 on the American song charts back in February, the first Israeli singer to do so. Let me share some of the details with those who are not familiar with this video which I found to be quite interesting...

The video shows Naim moving into an empty apartment. She covers the walls in wallpaper depicting a lake by a forest. She then begins unpacking several other things, including numerous portraits of people she hangs on the wall. As she hangs the portraits of the people on the wall, the people in the portrait are shown in real life, in the setting of where they are in the picture. Naim then begins painting on the portraits, which causes whatever she paints to appear with the people in real life. She then removes one of the portraits, to discover a hole in the wall, leading to the actual forest setting shown in the wallpaper. She pushes on the wall, and it falls down, leaving her standing right on the lake. The other three walls fall down, and all that's left is the floor of the apartment, which has now become like a raft floating on the lake. All the people from her portraits are then shown in a boat traveling towards her. They approach and climb on the makeshift raft with her, as they all celebrate.

Bethany, one of the things that I have learned about you over the past several months is a willingness to give and take in regards to your learning and it has been quite satisfying for me to observe your new soul develop as you take your rightful place as an adult in the Jewish community. Even though some of the things that were asked of you were difficult at times to master, you have not been afraid to push down the wall that surrounded you to open yourself to new experiences and expose yourself to a new world that awaits your creativity, your charm, your poise, your sensitivity, and your artistic talents. Like Naim, in the video, you have a community of people who surround you and support you in your endeavors, and who look forward to celebrating the joys in your life.

May you always find joy in all the things you undertake in life.

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Obituary - Irena Sendler

Social worker who saved 2,500 Jewish children in Warsaw and was tortured by the Gestapo.

Irena Sendler: We are not heroes. I continue to have qualms of conscience that I did so little.

Irena Sendler, who died yesterday aged 98, is credited with having saved the lives of some 2,500 Jewish children in the Warsaw ghetto during the Second World War.

By 1942 the Germans had herded some 500,000 Polish Jews into the ghetto – an area of about one square kilometre – to await transportation to the extermination camps. Starvation and disease, especially typhoid, were endemic.

Irena Sendler was a Polish Roman Catholic social worker in the city who already had links with Zegota, the code name for the Council for Aid to Jews, and in December 1942 Zegota put her in charge of its children's department. Wearing nurses' uniforms, she and a colleague, Irena Schultz, were sent into the ghetto with food, clothes and medicine, including a vaccine against typhoid. It soon became clear, however, that the ultimate destination of many of the Jews was to be the Treblinka death camp, and Zegota decided to try to save as many children as possible.

Using the codename "Jolanta", and wearing a Star of David armband to identify herself with the Jewish population, Irena Sendler became part of this escape network. One baby was spirited away in a mechanic's toolbox. Some children were transported in coffins, suitcases and sacks; others escaped through the sewer system beneath the city. An ambulance driver who smuggled infants beneath the stretchers in the back of his van kept his dog beside him in the front seat, having trained the animal to bark to mask any cries from his hidden passengers.

In later life Irena Sendler recalled the heartbreak of Jewish mothers having to part from their children: "We witnessed terrible scenes. Father agreed, but mother didn't. We sometimes had to leave those unfortunate families without taking their children from them. I'd go back there the next day and often found that everyone had been taken to the Umschlagsplatz railway siding for transport to the death camps."

The children who were taken by Irena Sendler were given new identities and placed with convents, sympathetic families, orphanages and hospitals. Those who were old enough to talk were taught Christian prayers and how to make the sign of the Cross, so that their Jewish heritage would not be suspected.

Like the more celebrated Oskar Schindler, Irena Sendler kept a list of the names of all the children she saved, in the hope that she could one day reunite them with their families. On the night of October 20 1943 Irena Sendler's house was raided by the Gestapo, and her immediate thought was to get rid of the list: "I wanted to throw it out of the window but couldn't, the whole house was surrounded by Germans. So I threw it to my colleague and went to open the door.

"There were 11 soldiers. In two hours they almost tore the whole house apart. The roll of names was saved due to the great courage and intelligence of my colleague, who hid it in her underwear."

The Nazis took Irena Sendler to the Pawiak prison, where she was tortured; although her legs and feet were broken, and her body left permanently scarred, she refused to betray her network of helpers or the children whom she had saved.

Finally, she was sentenced to death. She escaped thanks to Zegota, one of whose members bribed a guard to set her free. She immediately returned to her work using a new identity. Having retrieved her list of names, she buried it in a jar beneath an apple tree in a friend's garden.

In the end it provided a record of some 2,500 names, and after the war she attempted to keep her promise to reunite the children with their families. Most of the parents, however, had been gassed at Treblinka. Irena Sendler was born Irena Krzyzanowska in Warsaw on February 15 1910 into a Polish Roman Catholic family. Her father was a physician who ran a hospital at the

suburb of Otwock, and a number of his patients were impoverished Jews.

Although he died of typhus in 1917, his example was of profound importance to Irena, who later said: "I was taught that if you see a person drowning, you must jump into the water to save them, whether you can swim or not." After the war Irena Sendler continued in her profession as a social worker and also became a director of vocational schools. In 1965 she became one of the first Righteous Gentiles to be honoured by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. At that time Poland's Communist leaders would not allow her to travel to Israel, and she was unable to collect the award until 1983.

In 2003 she was awarded Poland's highest honour, the Order of the White Eagle; and last year she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, eventually won by Al Gore.

A play about her wartime experiences, called *Life in a Jar*, was written in 2000 by a group of American schoolgirls. It was performed on more than 200 occasions in the United States, Poland and Canada.

She was also the subject of a biography by Anna Mieszkowska, *Mother of the Children of the Holocaust: The Story of Irena Sendler*. Last year it was reported that Irena Sendler's exploits in Warsaw were to be the subject of a film, with Angelina Jolie in the starring role.

In her latter years Irena Sendler was cared for in a Warsaw nursing home by Elzbieta Ficowska, who – in July 1942, at six months old – had been smuggled out of the ghetto by Irena in a carpenter's workbox. In 2005 Irena Sendler reflected: "We who were rescuing children are not some kind of heroes. That term irritates me greatly. The opposite is true – I continue to have qualms of conscience that I did so little. I could have done more. This regret will follow me to my death."

Irena Sendler's first husband was Mieczyslaw Sendler. The marriage was dissolved, and she later married Stefan Zgrzembki, with whom she had two sons and a daughter. One of the boys died in infancy, and her second son in 1999. Her daughter survives her.