

How Will We Retell the Story of 2020

Shabbat D'varim 5780

July 24, 2020

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Each time I meet with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah student for the first time, I ask: “What are you looking forward to about your Bar or Bat Mitzvah?” Often, there’s a pause. The young person wonders if they may really answer truthfully: “The party!” The parents are momentarily mortified, but not I. Of course, the pre-teen is most excited about having all their friends come to celebrate them! Moreover, a year in advance, they feel unsure about their Hebrew, and they’re not yet at the point of looking forward to leading the service and reading from the Torah. By the time the Bar or Bat Mitzvah rolls around, virtually every young person is eager to demonstrate what they’ve achieved. And they’re still psyched for the party!

Let’s be honest: As beautifully as Maddie and Sadie have led our service tonight—and will again tomorrow, when they will also read and teach Torah—much about their B’not Mitzvah is disappointing. Their immediate family here in the Sanctuary should be surrounded in person by loving friends, family, and community. And there should be a party!

One minute dilemma about this B’not Mitzvah came when I filled out the Bat Mitzvah certificates. There’s a place where I’m supposed to write the week’s Torah portion. The trouble is that Sadie and Maddie are reading the portion for May 9, not for July 25, since we’re not so cruel as to make them learn a whole new portion when their B’not Mitzvah was rescheduled. Thankfully, that blank was long enough for me to write the truth: Maddie and Sadie are becoming B’not Mitzvah on Shabbat *D’varim*, reading *Parashat Emor*. In other words, Jews around the world this Shabbat are reading the fist portion of the Book of Deuteronomy, while Sadie and Maddie will read the May 9 selection from Leviticus.

Maddie and Sadie will teach you about *Parahat Emor* tomorrow. Tonight, I would like to say a few words about why Deuteronomy is appropriate to this occasion—not as it was supposed to, but as it is.

Deuteronomy purports to be a long final oration by Moses, recalling the experiences of the Israelites since leaving Egypt nearly forty years earlier—essentially, a recap of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Scholars think that the book was written after the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. After that terrible disaster, Kings Hezekiah and Josiah enacted reforms that would improve Judean society and hopefully avert calamity in the Southern Kingdom of Judea to match the catastrophe up north.ⁱ The authors of Deuteronomy

have Moses retelling the stories and laws a little differently from how they appear in earlier books, to achieve the kings' goal of strengthening their society.

In the years ahead, we, too, will be living in the wake of a disaster. Right now, we remain in the midst of a global pandemic, not to mention civil unrest, a renewed recognition of racial injustice, and a harshly divided nation. We face countless disappointments, not the least of them being a B'not Mitzvah that doesn't match plans and dreams. God willing, in the years to come, we will draw lessons from this calamitous year, telling its story in a way that shapes a better future, much as Deuteronomy strengthened ancient Judea.

Kings Hezekiah and Josiah weren't the last Jewish leaders to recreate society in order to improve it. Centuries later, as the Second Temple was destroyed, our rabbis led a revolution to assure that the worship of God would continue. That rebellion was not fought with armies but with ideas.

My teacher, Rabbi Donniel Hartman, has described an important aspect of the rabbinic upheaval. In biblical theology, when something bad happened, the explanation was that you had done something wrong. The rabbis disagreed. Yes, we should examine our behavior after a calamity, but not to assign blame. Instead, we must learn how we might do better the next time.ⁱⁱ

Rabbi Hartman goes on to tell a touching story about his own parents, of blessed memory, and what he has learned from the pandemic. Whenever he misbehaved as a child, Rabbi Hartman's parents would remind him, "Donniel, you're a gift." Indeed, each of us is a gift from God. However, Hartman says that Coronavirus has taught him, "I'm not a gift," or at least not always. Each of us, we now know very clearly, can endanger others. When we choose to disregard public health, gathering in close proximity with people not from our own households, especially when not wearing masks, we imperil others, not only ourselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Hartman reminds us of a commandment in Deuteronomy: "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet[--that is, a railing--]for your roof."^{iv} In a time and region where rooves were flat and people walked around the neighborhood on top of the houses, the railings were a safety precaution no different from masks and social distancing today. The *mitzvah* boils down to a requirement that we not take action that endangers others.

When we retell the story of 2020, I pray we will describe a commitment to live our lives in ways that care for the wellbeing of others—not only ourselves, not only our own families, but our entire community, our nation, and the full human family. Fulfilling that *mizvah*, building that metaphorical railing around our rooves, requires us to do even more than protect other people's health. The commandment

to safeguard our houses includes taking responsibility for racial justice in our nation. Assuring the wellbeing of others at a time of deep societal division demands that we not lash out cruelly against those who do not share our views and that we not imperil the civil liberties of people who disagree with us.

When we retell the story of 2020, I hope we will also tell a story of resilience—for example, of two young teenagers who persisted, becoming B’not Mitzvah with integrity despite deep disappointment, and of all the others like them whose special moment—from births to graduations to weddings and so many more, could not be celebrated as planned. The railing we can build around this particular roof is to ask ourselves, “What would I have done to enhance the celebration if there were no pandemic? What part of that can I still do, or what can I do instead?”

When we retell the story of 2020, we will acknowledge that the world did not turn out as we wished this year. Let us affirm that we nevertheless accepted the world as it is, with gratitude to God for creation, however imperfect. And let us celebrate that each of us did—and will continue, long after this terrible pandemic is over, to do—our part to protect and enhance the life of our entire human family.

Amen.

ⁱ W. Gunther Plaut, Editor, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Revised Edition, New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005, pp. 1142-3.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, “Moral Principles and Priorities in a Changing Landscape: Ethical Pivots in the Age of Corona,” HartmanSummer@Home, Shalom Hartman Institute, June 29, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Deuteronomy 22:8.