

“The Process” – Sermon for Parshat Emor
B’nai Mitzvah Inauguration
May 13, 2017; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

Before the end of this d’var Torah, I’m going to mention one of my students. Right here, in front of everyone. They don’t know who it’s going to be, or what I’m going to say. Normally, they should have no reason to worry. After all, most normal people would never say something bad about one of their poor, defenseless students in a situation like this. So it should be something good I’ll say about the student, right? But they know I’m not normal. So now I have their attention. Mwahaha.

Today is a kickoff celebration of the upcoming class’ b’nai mitzvah year. Now, some might say that b’nai mitzvah preparation began in my class two years ago, learning Torah trope, and continued this year with learning Haftarah trope and the Torah Service.

Those things happened, and they will be used at each bar and bat mitzvah. But I don’t consider those things b’nai mitzvah preparation. They’re Jewish life skills.

Consider the Torah Service. There are as many tunes for Adon Olam as there are opinions in the Talmud. But if you go almost anywhere on any given Shabbat – anywhere in the United States, overseas, or even Texas – the Torah Service melodies are pretty much the same. The only real difference in the melodies, from place to place, is how out of tune the leader might be.

So, you know the Torah Service. In a few years, you go to a USY weekend. Saturday morning, you know what’s going on. You go to college. You don’t know anyone, you want something that feels familiar. You go to Hillel. You hear things that you know during the service. Familiar. And maybe you even regale people over a glass of Manischewitz with other tidbits you picked up like how a Haftarah is not half a Torah.

Maybe you don’t do any of those, but sometime when you’re an adult – wherever you live – for one of many reasons (getting married, you have kids, something happens in your life), you walk into a synagogue one Saturday. It sounds familiar. You have kids some day – not soon – and they have a bar or bat mitzvah. You know the Torah Service, so you know what’s going on at it. Jewish life skills.

You don’t believe me. Or, you’re eleven and who cares about all that yet. Okay. But consider this absolutely true story. About ten years ago, one High Holy Days, a guy in his mid-twenties comes up to me. Looks sharp, successful. Says I won’t remember who he is. I did. He was a bar mitzvah student of mine about ten years before that. Decent kid. Not particularly enthused, not particularly interested. Did okay, but someone you figured would never walk in the synagogue again after his bar mitzvah even if he forgot his wallet there that day. Some are like that. Not here, of course.

This guy apologized to me for how awful a student he figured he was, and then thanked me. What he'd learned during his bar mitzvah process didn't matter to him very much at the time. But it lurked in the back of his mind, just waiting. Years later it gave him a foot in the door. He didn't become all stringently observant as you might think from a story like this. It just helped him connect, in the way that worked for him, when it worked for him. And he was grateful. Without having learned what he learned leading up to his bar mitzvah, what happened with him years later might not have happened at all.

It's great that he eventually found connection, and had enough lingering familiarity to help him find it. Of course, it's not just about the future. We foster connection now. If you have it, great. But the point is, if you don't, all this is equipping you with the means to find it, whenever, wherever, whyever.

Learning the Torah and Haftarah trope similarly gives you foundation and familiarity. It also exercises analytical, musical, and puzzle-solving skills that go well beyond this room. But this is a d'var Torah. So, let's Torah this up a little.

Every parsha – every Torah reading – has relevance to us today. Nothing better demonstrates that than Leviticus, the book full of laws, which we're in the middle of now. As the song says, if you can find relevance there, you can find it anywhere.

For example, the end of this week's parsha expounds on the penalties for murder and other high crimes. Much can be tied in from this to the modern judicial system, and society in general. However, it also provides an obvious parallel to the b'nai mitzvah process, because the penalties it describes for murder and other high crimes are similar to the penalties for not practicing every week.

Well, that's not exactly true. The penalty for not practicing every week is being subjected to more of my jokes, which makes the biblical penalties seem not so bad by comparison.

Earlier, the parsha enumerates the main holy days throughout the year. First, Shabbat. Then Passover. Then what we call Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Then Sukkot.

Take Sukkot as an example. The reading tells us that the first and eighth days of Sukkot are days of rest. Then it says “on the first day, take the fruit of the hadar tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows, and rejoice for the seven days.”

You might not recognize what it's talking about, but it's talking about putting together a Lulav. I'm not going to delve right now into why these particular things are instructed to be done. I'll just remind you that some observances are about context. Something that makes no sense to us today made perfect sense back then, because it fit the world they lived in. It's like the next generation of Cubs fans, who will never truly comprehend the aimless wandering endured by previous generations of their people without ever reaching home at the end of the World Series.

The parsha's connection to today isn't specifically the Lulav, or why we do it. It's how. The Torah spells out a process. Step one: get fruit from the hadar tree. Step two: get some palm fronds. Step three: a branch from a braided tree. Step four: visit Willow Glen. Then, once you've done all four steps, you can put together your Lulav.

It's a process. It tells you to prepare the different pieces, one at a time, then put them together, and then use what you created to celebrate and enjoy for seven days.

It does *not* say to get all four things at once, on the seventh day, and frantically cram them together at the last minute such that there's no joy in it.

Sound familiar yet? How about this. Step one: read the Hebrew well. Step two: read the names of the trope notes in your reading. Step three: sing the names of the trope notes in your reading. Step four: put the Hebrew and notes together. One step at a time, so you can enjoy what you created. Not frantically cramming it together at the last minute, and ending up with something half-baked.

Have you ever baked something? Like the loaves instructed in the next aliyah? You get the ingredients ready, one at a time, and then combine them. If you do it too fast, things don't rise correctly. Or whatever the right cooking term is.

In teaching us to make a Lulav for Sukkot, and so many other things, the Torah demonstrates to us – without saying it overtly – the benefits of following a step-by-step process. Sometimes finding relevance is about looking beyond the words, to see the forest for the trees.

Let's consider an example from another religion: Football. You work your way down the field. You get a first down, and another, and another. Eventually, you get to the end zone. It's a process to get to the end zone, not one big leap. Now, I know one of you is thinking that you can occasionally have one long play to get straight to the end zone. That's true, but the odds of a successful 80-yard run or of throwing a Hail Moische are really low – much lower than working your way down the field.

Besides, when do you try for a huge play like that? Out of desperation, late in the game, when you're behind. Any team will tell you they'd rather not be in that position in the first place. And, remember, the bar/bat mitzvah is not the end of the game.

Again, we often think of all this as the bar mitzvah process. That the end point is the bar or bat mitzvah itself. Yes, it's reaching the end zone. But it's a first quarter touchdown. The rest of the game still lies ahead.

A popular question in class is, "what if I don't do it?" "What if I don't finish that second Haftarah reading?" "What if I don't practice every week?" Those questions serve only one purpose. They're looking for an out, a way to decide that the bad consequences aren't so bad. This is a glass half empty. It's negative. Besides, we'll end up doing it anyway.

So, any time spent squirming against doing it simply delays the effort. It also makes the effort harder, because of less time remaining and probably less motivation.

A *slightly* better question is “why do I have to do it?” It’s still trying to get out of it, but seeks an answer. Thankfully, we’re at a point where we can have better answers than “I had to do it, so you have to.” I often hear adults say they wish they’d learned more of this back then. Here’s the chance for us to make it better for them than we had.

But we can frame the question even better still. John F. Kennedy once said, “ask not what your bar mitzvah can do for you, ask what you can do for your bar mitzvah.” With apologies to New York’s largest airport, I actually want us to ask both those questions. It’s important to pursue what you can do for your bar mitzvah, but you should also wonder what your bar mitzvah can do for you. For each of you the answer will be different. In our first session, I always ask what this bar mitzvah thing is about anyway. After hearing a typical, textbook answer, I tell you to find a more personal answer, for yourself. I don’t need to hear the answer. But you do.

But, as we learn on Passover, questions come in fours. With that in mind, I challenge you to find the best question. Make it a positive. Instead of asking “what if I don’t do it,” or “why do I have to do it,” or even JFK’s greatest hit... Ask, “what if I *do* it?” What will it mean to me to accomplish this? What does it mean now? What might it mean later that I did it now?

Remember last Sunday, when we did a walkthrough of today? Even though we’ve been doing this stuff all year, remember how surprised you all were at how fast it went by? How all of a sudden it seemed like there was so little to learn in the Torah Service after all, once it was all put together? What other good surprises lay ahead? I challenge you to go in, eager to find out.

And don’t forget to thank Jon’s dad Steve.

I didn’t say I’d mention one of my *current* students in the d’var Torah. Made you listen.

(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like my monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>.)