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At Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel
23 July 2011 – Parashat Matot

Shabbat shalom.

It's a pleasure and a privilege to stand here today to share some thoughts with you as I prepare to move to Boston, where two of my sons and both of my granddaughters live. The wonderful BEKI community has been my home for 15 years and I treasure the memories of all the things we've done together – gathering to pray and study, schmoozing at kiddush, planning and carrying out renovations, wine tastings, auctions, tribute dinners, and much more. I moved here when I took a job at Yale and have no family in New Haven: you have become like family to me. I am deeply touched and grateful to be honored with a kiddush today and to share that honor with Jay, our extraordinary immediate past president. Of course, since my house hasn't been sold yet, I'll still be around for at least a few more weeks. There's an old song, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?" I hope you'll forgive me for hanging around after the official farewell.

I want to talk about three things that relate to each other: first, my mother's approach to teaching Jewish values; second, a commandment that appears at the beginning of this week's Torah portion that makes no sense today; and finally, a position held by the Conservative movement that -- to my mind -- also makes no sense and ought to be altered, in light of the values that my mother taught.

First things first. As many of you know, my mother Shulamit Lubarr passed away last year. She was a gifted Hebrew teacher. She taught kitah aleph and bet for many years at Hebrew schools in New Jersey and Florida and helped hundreds of children learn to read Hebrew and begin to understand their heritage. Quite a few of her students grew up to become rabbis and Jewish educators, but even the students who were dragged against their will to Hebrew school were influenced for the good by her loving instruction and deep commitment to Judaism.

At the beginning of each class when she called the roll, her students were taught to answer not with "here" or the Hebrew equivalent, *poh* or *hineni*, but with a *pitgam*, a Hebrew aphorism. She would post a new one every week on the classroom wall, often with a story to illustrate the message. Over the course of the school year, the kids would memorize a fair number of these. The sayings she chose reflected her particular take on Judaism, which tended to the ethical rather than the spiritual. In cleaning out her apartment last year, my sister Naomi and I came across some of these sayings, which I've brought with me to show you.

Some of the *pitgamim* were easy to memorize and therefore were very popular with the kids: "*Tov shem m'shemem tov*" – a good name is better than precious oil – you only had to

master three words for that one – or even better, only two words for “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof,*” Justice, justice shall you pursue.

My mother was a compassionate person, and quite a few of the pitgamim emphasized empathy: *Al tadin et chavercha ad shetageea l'mikomo*: don't judge another person until you're in his situation. *Al ta'amod al dam reyecha*: don't stand idly by when your friend is suffering. And Hillel's version of the golden rule: *Ma shesanu alecha, al ta'aseh lachavercha*: don't do to others that which is hateful to you.

She taught the importance of being part of k'lal Yisrael -- *Al tifrosh min ha-tzibur*: don't alienate yourself from the community.

One of my favorites was “*Al tistakel b'kankan, ellah b'mah sheyesh bo,*” don't look at the vessel, but at what's in it. In other words, don't judge a book by its cover. There's a folktale that illustrated this pitgam: A young woman saw a very unattractive scholar enter her father's house and muttered, “what a pity that such a beautiful mind is in such an ugly person.” The scholar overheard, and when they sat down to dinner he asked her, “why does your father serve his wine in a plain clay jar? Why not a silver pitcher?” She had her father pour the wine into a silver pitcher. The wine reacted with the metal and became bitter. The scholar noted, “*Al tistakel b'kankan, ellah b'mah sheyesh bo.*” Don't look at the vessel, but at what's in it.

But of course, we do look at externals, and that can influence how we treat people. Which brings me to the *parasha*. *Mattot* opens by talking about promises and vows, and the importance of carrying out what you swear to do.

That is, unless you belong to the female persuasion. Look at Chapter 42, verses 11-14. If you're a grown woman, your husband could nullify any vow you made, so long as he spoke up when he heard about it.

This position reflected the norms of the time and the second-class status women held. Today, I think most of us would agree that the rule – and the underlying idea – is unacceptable and even offensive. It infantilizes and degrades women. Why should gender make any difference in the making and keeping of vows?

It no longer does, of course. Within the Conservative movement, women and men now have gender equality. Women can take upon themselves ritual obligations without reference to the men in their lives. I enjoy privileges that were barely imaginable when I was growing up. I can read Torah, lead the congregation in communal worship, even have an Aliyah. Women can be ordained as rabbis and cantors. When I was a girl, these things were unthinkable. Now we take them for granted.

Making the move to egalitarianism involved long and careful study by the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Historical precedents and texts were

brought in to justify the changes, which were deeply controversial at the time. The congregation I belonged to on Long Island was nearly torn apart over the issue.

But now that we're here, would any of us want to go back? Judaism evolves and is the stronger for it.

I want to call your attention to a change that still needs to be made to correct an anti-egalitarian, unjust, and unwise position that Conservative Judaism continues to uphold. I'm referring to matrilineal descent.

If a Jewish woman has a child with a non-Jewish man, that child is considered to be Jewish. But if the opposite is true, and father is Jewish but the mother is not, then according to Conservative and Orthodox doctrine, the child is not Jewish. (The Reform movement has already ruled that Jewish identity can be passed down through the mother and the father equally.)

The logic behind this may have made sense in generations past, when it was impossible to establish paternity with absolute certainty. But that's no longer the case – read this week's New Haven Independent article on the walk-in DNA testing clinic for a local solution to the problem.

This issue touches me personally, as you probably know. My two granddaughters – Ariel and Zohar – are being brought up in a traditional Jewish home where *kabbalat Shabbat* happens every week, the Sh'ma is sung every night at bedtime, and the kitchen is kosher.

But their mother is not Jewish. Are the girls Jewish? They certainly think so. But the Conservative movement and the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston don't agree with them, so Ariel goes to the Rashi School, which is affiliated with the Reform movement, and Zohar will, too, when she's old enough.

Insisting on matrilineal descent is deeply unwise, given demographic trends. How many Jews intermarry and raise their children without a Jewish education, without a Jewish home?

How many turn away from Judaism in favor of Buddhism, atheism, or plain old apathy?

How many Jews are “culturally” Jewish, Woody Allen Jews, Katz's Deli Jews, with no substance to their Judaism? Will their children have any reason to remain Jewish?

In a very real sense, we have lost these people, or their children, perhaps forever.

So when a child is raised in a halachically-committed Jewish household; when a child is educated at a synagogue nursery school and a Jewish day school or Hebrew school; when a child feels herself to have a Jewish soul and knows herself to be Jewish – and all this is true

of my granddaughters – should we tell this child “No, not good enough! You aren’t really Jewish!”? With all the people born to Jewish mothers who reject or neglect Jewish study and practice, can we afford to reject children like Ariel and Zohar?

And even if we can *survive* without accepting patrilineal descent – do we want to tell these children that two of the three major Jewish movements reject them? *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*. Don't cut yourself off from your community, but also don't push away people who *want* to be part of it.

A teshuvah published by the Rabbinical Assembly this past May objects to a decision made by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate to require documents proving the Jewishness of a person's mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great grandmother when applying to get married in Israel. The RA comments that “Needless to say, this is a near impossibility for most people,” and goes on to argue, “Where one is part of a Jewish community and has been living as a Jew, there is no need to instigate an investigation into that person's Jewishness. We affirm that trust is the default position in these matters.”

If that's the default position, then it sounds to me like a reason to accept patrilineal descent in situations like my granddaughters'.

Al tistakel b'kankan, ellah b'mah sheyesh bo. Will we continue to focus on the vessel – from which parent is the Jewish blood passed down?

Or will we instead look to the beautiful Jewish souls inside, and say YES, we want you to pray with us, learn with us, be with us – because you *are* one of us?

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof. Justice, justice shall you pursue. THIS is the justice we should pursue.

Shabbat shalom!