D'var Torah:
Ekev - Get Yourself a Teacher, Aquire Yourself a Friend
July 30, 1999

This was a different sermon until about 11:00 am this morning. It was around that time that I was walking through the hallways at the Hebrew Union College, the institution that I have been a student at for the last five years, and in whose hallowed halls the words of Torah were made sweet as honey on my lips. It was at HUC that I first discovered the beauty of Hebrew Poetry, as my teacher sitting on top of his desk, in our Jerusalem campus classroom, his Israeli handled feet dangling like fringes on a tallit, read the words of Amos Oz. Oz wrote of the tourists in Jerusalem that point to Israelis as land marks for historical sites. "You see that man over there with the bag of fruit, right above him is a 3rd century arch." And the irony of it all, when we realize that it is not the arch that is amazing, but the man who provides food for his family, and lives and works amidst this ancient city.

It was within the walls of the HUC Los Angeles campus that I was first introduced to Midrash, with its creative and though provoking insight and commentary on Torah. Through the patient instruction of my teachers I was taught how to read the words, in their ancient tongue, and how to uncover the layer upon layer of meaning that had been hidden to me until they taught me how to look for it.

My time as a student at HUC is drawing to a close, I go there one day a week now to work silently in a corner of the library on my thesis. Its a pretty solitary existence and not one I am accustom to given the collegial relationship of students and faculty on the campus. So it was today, that I found myself walking down the hall, as orientation classes were beginning, students rushing from one room to the other. As I walked down the hall my eyes glanced as they have done many times before upon the

wall of pictures of deceased faculty members. For years I would glance at these black and white portraits as I hurried to this room or that lecture. I would recognize a name or two, but I didn't know the faces, they were not my teachers, I had not sat at their feet and drank the words of Torah they taught.

Today though my eyes scanned down the row, and then back again, a new picture had been added since I was here last summer. I knew this face, I knew this man, this was one of MY teachers, one of the people who made Torah sweet for me. It had been a number of months since his death and I was in Cincinnati when it happened, we mourned as a college community, but not being here somehow prevented it from sinking in. Today at 11am it sunk in, I had lost one of my teachers, and I felt very much like the first time my parents took the training wheels off my bike and then let go of the seat as I began to pedal on my own, not knowing if I would find balance and ride, or get scared and fall over. When you discover that one of the people helped shape you and form you into the person you are is no longer part of your life, it is as disorienting and frightening as those first moments biking without training wheels.

The Talmud proclaims, *oseh lechah rav, ookoneh lecha haver | get your self a teacher and you will acquire for yourself a friend*. The Talmud is telling us that a teacher and a friend are one and the same, to have one, is in fact to have both. Often times our teachers don't know that they are also our friends and more often still our friends never realize just how much they teach us every day of our life. Today my thoughts turned toward a college professor, one who took a particular interest in me and whose love of Torah and the Jewish people I wanted to emulate and to share with the world. But our teachers don't have to have a degree to be called such. We have teachers in our lives that come from many different parts of our lives. Think about it for a moment. Who

would you place on your list of teachers in life? Your parents? Your spouse? Your grandparents? Your little league baseball coach? A co-worker? A mentor? Your children? It a pretty distinguished and cherished list, when we really think about it, these are the people that matter most in our life, they have helped shape us and mold us into the people that we are now or they helping us become the people we want to be. The Talmud is correct the people on this list are our friends as well, as teachers.

For the Israelites in this weeks Torah portion Moses was on that list, he had been all of the above to the Jewish people, father figure, teacher, coach, mentor, and friend. Though our tradition and the Torah text set Moses a part from the people, by focusing on his personal story, by emphasizing his relationship with God, the text struggles to remind us that he was one OF the people as well. Our leader, the man our tradition calls Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our Teacher was one of us, his birth took place in a Hebrew tent, not a palace, not by some divine light, he felt pain as any person would, when Miriam his sister took ill he cried out to God in the first prayer for healing, he rejoiced with us at the shores of the red sea, and joined in singing a song of freedom. He got angry, he got frustrated, he walked the same desert as everybody else for 40 plus years. And it was his every personnels combined with his unique ability to understand what God wanted of this people that made him our leader, our teacher and as the text suggest our friend. The Jewish people could relate to Moses because he was one of them and for that same reason they were inspired by his leadership and insight.

This is what a teacher does and is, we are drawn to them because they are so much like us, their passions and energy mirror what we would like our own to be. They inspire us and instruct us because they have managed to do with their life, or their field of knowledge that which we would like to do with ours. This is what Moses was

for the Jewish people, they literally got where they were going because they followed his lead, heeded his lessons, observed his instructions. And that is what the people on our list have done in our lives as well.

We can imagine then what the Jewish people must feel at this moment in our story as it becomes apparent to them that their teacher, Moshe Rabbenu, our teacher, is about to leave them forever. His life was such a blessing and an inspiration to this people, a people that were once slaves and are now free because of him and his ability to understand God. Moses is about to die and the people sit at his feet to drink in all of his words, to hear one more lesson, to gain one more insight or bit of guidance before he departs and the training wheels on their own journey are finally taken off, for them to continue without his support.

We wonder from time to time what do these old stories in the Torah have to say to us today, what relevancy is a 5,000 year old tradition in this modern world? Here is the relevancy, here Torah speaks to us as if it was written today, for us, for me as I stare at this picture on the wall. We are to cherish our teachers, our friends, recognizing that every moment in life is precious and the teachings they have to offer are not to be waisted or squandered, because of our ego, bickering, our pride, all things that get in the way of us hearing the message, learning the teaching.

At some point in life the training wheels must come off, the teacher can no longer teach and the student must become a teacher himself. We know this moment is out there, but how do we prepare for it?. Moses and the Israelites sat down and went over things one more time, they reviewed the lessons the journey had given them and were thus prepared to continue on inspired by him, but unassisted at every wobble and turn. So to for us: We must identify who our teachers our in life, whose life and insight is a

lesson for us. We can learn more from them. We can drink in their knowledge, enthusiasm, their vision of the world. What stops us? Is it time? Is it denial? Is it our own pride at not admitting when we don't know enough even to say I don't know how, teach me?

Listen to the Torah, listen to Moses's instructions this very week in our Parsha: "Cut away the thickening that envelopes your hearts and stiffen your neck no more. For the Eternal shows no favor and takes no bride, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. So to You MUST HEED THIS LESSON, you must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Torah commands don't let our own selfish nature, our know it all sense of self get in the way of learning, of seeking and heeding the lessons our teachers and our friends have to teach us. On this shabbat, may the lessons we learn be how to learn a lesson. On this Shabbat, as we go home with our families, spend our weekend laying about the house, let us sit at the feet of our teachers and friends, open up our hearts and our minds and drink their stories and their teachings. On this Shabbat let us make Torah our teacher. "If only you would listen" begs the Torah in this week's Torah portion, then all of God's blessings would find you.