Shavuoth 5762
"If the Torah Fits"
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

There are two businesses in my family. My father, and his father before him, and his father before him were in the *schemata* business; retail men's clothing to be more precise. When my father was 9 or 10 he started working in the stock room of the family store, and when I was about that age I did the same. Eventually he owned his own chain of stores in the Bay Area, and just retired about a year ago. That lasted all of 6 weeks and now he works at Nordstrom's in the men's department, he leads the corporation in sales, my dad just loves to selling suits. I distinctly remember, my fifth grade graduation, all the other boys were in new blazers from Sears or Mervin's, I wore a grey pinstriped 3 piece suit, that the store tailor had fitted to me a week before. I think I was the only 10 year old who knew how to markup a jacket with tailor's chalk or measure an inseam, not that I ever shared that information with anyone in my class. I was proud of what my dad did, the suit that I wore, and though one could say that it was my destiny to take over the business when I was of age, being a clothing salesman, never really fit me as well as that suit did, and so it was not the path I chose.

The other family business was in a way also in sales, thought the product very different. My grandmother and now my mother tutored people who want to convert to Judaism. It didn't pay as well, but at the same time you never had to worry about inventory. Beginning with my Grandma in the 1950's people would come to her home, sit for an hour or two at her kitchen table and learn about Judaism, its rich traditions, customs, and history. They would come to our holiday celebrations, they would attend services and sit with our family, and all in preparation for the day that they would stand

before a Beit Din, a panel of rabbis and declare of their own free will that they wished to join the Jewish people, to accept the responsibilities and indeed the hardships of being Jewish, to become a practicing Jew. Between my grandmother and my mom, who still shares the richness of Judaism with those who seek to embrace it into their lives, only from the dinning room table instead of the kitchen table, between them they have helped more than 1,500 people find a path to Jewish living.

It was an amazing thing to grow up in my home, my folks used to joke, that my dad would cloth their body and my mom would cloth their soul. Both of them took great pride in the fact that they found true satisfaction in their work, by fitting the individual just right.

I have often wondered, and been asked by students of my own, at what point does one stop trying to be Jewish and actually become Jewish. At what point does the clothing of Judaism fit just right on the body of the individual seeker? Can it ever be a perfect fit? My answer, in my best attempt at Rabbinic wisdom is, that as soon as it happens to me I will let them know. The truth is that Judaism never fits like a glove, there are parts of it and in it that will always be uncomfortable, too restrictive, or too loose, our challenge is to find a balance in the alteration of it and ourselves that approximates a perfect fit, while still retaining our own shape, and not making the garment or ourselves unrecognizable in the process.

Friends, it is not enough to say, as many Rabbis do that we are all Jews-by-choice in today's world. The choice to be or not to be Jewish is just he first step, actually living Jewishly, fitting ourselves and this sacred heritage together, that is by far the most challenging part. And to that I say proudly that we are all practicing Jews, in that I mean

that we are all still practicing at being Jewish, none of us have perfected it, not because we are reform, not because we have not accepted the decision to be Jewish, made by us or for us, but because Judaism, like any aspect of our identity is a work in progress, we are continually adjusting it and ourselves to make it a better fit.

In our world today we tend to forget that change does not happen over night, or even at a dinning room table. Honestly does a wedding ceremony transform a single person, with all of his or her self-centeredness to a spouse and life-partner? Are man and women magically transformed into a mothers or fathers at the birth of a child? Does a 13 year old boy become an adult simply because he has learned his Torah portion and has a Bar Mitzvah, as our tradition would suggest.

We are expected to be those things at the moment it is ordained that we become them, but in reality we all know that it is simply not the case. No proclamation, event or blessing transforms our spirit, or our soul, it is only our title, and the community's expectations of us that change in an instant, we take a life time to grow in to the roles we play in life. It takes thousands of adjustments to make a perfect fit, and even then something will change the fit again.

As an adult, I am just now figuring out how I could have made the most of my childhood. Now that I finished school, I am finally ready, though I admit not willing to be a serious student. After eight years of marriage, I finally understand the first two or three of them. Their is a learning curve to everything, the learning curve to being Jewish is exactly one day longer than our lives will be.

Last night and today we celebrated the holiday of Shavuoth, it was at this time, on this date thousands of years ago that the Jewish people were given the Torah. They stood

at the base of Mt Sinai a persecuted and unruly people. They had lived a life of toil, they had assimilated into Egyptian society, they had worshipped idols and they had forsaken their traditions. In a moment Moses came down from the mountain and gave them the Torah. In an instant they accepted it and they and all future generations were forever bound to its teachings and precepts. They had not even read it yet, but they were expected to follow in its ways, to walk in its paths.

How could this be so? Was there not a recognition that they needed to study and learn what was inside before they could be expected to be what they had suddenly become? The answer from our tradition is a resounding yes, if we read the Torah and the later books of the Hebrew Bible, along with the Talmud and later rabbinic texts through the lens of finding a perfect fit then, those things that are so uncomfortable for us in Jewish history begin to make sense in the context of history. Sure Judaism has things in it that we are not proud of our, would choose not to practice today. Two weeks ago we read of a vengeful God who would punish the Jewish people if they did not observe the commandments. Students of Torah, of which we all are, can point out countless times when Torah seems to get it wrong. Sacrifice, homesexuality, treatment of women, rules concerning classes of people. There is much in our tradition that does not fit with our modern sensibilities, albeit our modern morality. Do we chuck it all because some of it is so unsettling? No we need to make it fit, to find a place for those teachings in our lives and to find a place for ourselves in our tradition, and forever being conscious of never so distorting either that they become unrecognizeable.

That is what it means to receive Torah in your life, to be a practicing Jew, a Jew-by-choice. It is not enough to do it once, we must do it everyday, continually engaging

with our tradition, continuing to try and find the right fabric for our lives, to make a better, but maybe never perfect fit. The alternative, would be to go naked in this world, without the protection of our tradition against the cold and storms of life, without the warmth of a finely woven Jewish identity, that will allow our people to endure.

I have still never bought a suit retail in my life, I get them wholesale from my Dad, but with regard to a family business I like to think that I have found a happy medium between my parents two professions. For sure I am a Jewish educator, but I am also a clothing salesman, the suits I sell are Judaism itself, my job is fit every customer into the brand of Judaism that fits them best. Sometimes that means making an alteration or two, providing a little more wiggle room so it fits better, here or there, but in the end I only sell suits, if the Judaism you want is a tank top and shorts, I may not be able to help, but I can make you a nice deal on a summer suit. On this holiday of shavuoth, when Moses gave the Torah to our people at Mt Sinai, let us stand again at Sinai, this day and every day, every day let us again receive Torah, to make the choice no only to be Jewish but to live Jewishly, to struggle with our tradition to try and find a fit for it and ourselves.