D'var Torah: Deuteronomy
Tell The Story

My great grandfather was a businessman in Augusta, Georgia. An often told family story tells of the time he was approached by a friend of a friend seeking venture capital for a new business he was putting together. My Great-grandfather, a man I never met, but whose hairline I am told I share. Asked the man about the product he was looking to produce. The man pulled out a thermos from his satchel and poured a brown sparklely liquid into a glass. My great-grandfather drank it as the man looked on expectantly. "So what do you think?" The man asked. "How much did you say you needed?" Great-grandfather replied (in business I am told it is good to answer a question with a question, the same I have discovered can be said for the rabbinate.) The man replied, $10,000 and I will split all the profits with you. My great-grandfather, thought for a moment and then shook his head, saying to the man, "that's a lot of money for just another soda pop, I'm not interested. My great-grand father went back to minding the shelves in his liquor store, the man left the shop and got someone else to invest in the company; the company, with its sweet tasting beverage went on to become Coca-cola.

I wasn't there, I never knew my great-grandfather, I have only seen one picture of the man. But every year when this story is re-told in my family, usually accompanying another tale of opportunities lost, riches never made, I feel a deep sense of shame, guilt and I guess it I am being totally honest I get a bit angry, not at my great-grandfather, but just at the whole situation, why didn't my family know better, didn't they realize the riches they could of had. The anger is of course misplaced, and the

answer is of course no, if they had realized the money they could have made on the investment they would have made it. But still by knowing what could have been, were it not for my family's lack of vision, I must live with the reality that all this time people could have been drinking "Moskovitz-Cola". Of course if we named it that we'd all drink Pepsi.

In two weeks we will read the Torah portion, *Devarim,* the beginning of the fifth and final book, Deuteronomy, there we come upon Moses' farewell address to the Jewish people. Assembled before him are 600,000 Jews. Forty years have passed since the exodus from Egypt, the generation of slaves has died and is now replaced with people who have known only wandering and freedom. They speak Hebrew not Eyptian, they pray to one God not many. They never knew Moses as anyone but the prophet of God. Since the day of their birth they have done only what God, through Moses commanded. They ate manna, a food that dropped from the heavens, they fought battles at Moses's instruction, they assembled and counted themselves in tribes as ordained by Torah. So where does Moses begin his speech to this "the choice of the next generation"? Does he tell them of what lies over the horizon, of the promised land on the other side of the Jordan, of what is ahead? No he tells them what they left behind, who and what they endured to get her, of the places and trials and even arguments that littered the past 40 years. He tells the assembled masses, who have no first hand knowledge of this period of Jewish history, who are no more responsible for the actions of the previous generation, than I am for my great grandfather's dislike for cola. Moses tells these people the story of who they are and where they came from. He speaks to them as if they were there, as if it was them and not their parents, their

grandparents that crossed the red sea, that saw the fire of God on the mountain, that bickered and argued over the food, the water, the heat.

The people respond with a shutter, their feet are tired from miles they did not walk, their backs ache because of bricks they did not bear, they shed tears that are not their own.

What is going on here, what is it in the human condition that binds one generation so closely to the other? It is the story, it is the oral thread those before us have used to weave the fabric of our lives together with theirs, it is the telling and re-telling of who we are, where we came from, what we endured to get here, what we hold up as important that unites the soul of one generation with that of one they never knew.

In Hebrew the one who leads a service is called the *Shaliach Tz'bour* the one who delivers the story. Our tradition teaches, through Moses' farewell address to the people, through the tradition of reading Torah three days a week, through the telling of the Passover story, from a book whose name in English means, the telling. Through the commandment to *zachor*, to remember the Shabbat, to remember our loved ones who have died. In all of this Judaism makes clear that the story and our ability to re-tell it is not only the strength of the Jewish people, but to the extent that we can retell it, it will be the salvation or destruction of the Jewish people as well.

Ask yourself, how well do you know the story of your family? Who came across the oceans first? How did they get here, what did they do, how did they make ends meet? If you don't know these stories, you probably know how to find out. The stories of our families are dear to us, we nurture them and transmit them across Seder tables, at bed time with our children, at the bedside of an ailing parent as we ask, "tell me

about..." "What was it like when...." Without them the collective pride and even the shared sense of guilt or responsibility we feel as part of that clan, that family would be lost and with it part of our identity, of who we believe ourselves to be.

Now ask yourself, how well do you know the stories of our people, the Jewish people? Do you know them in the intimate detail that you know about uncle Bernie's journey across the ocean in a steamer trunk, or the way your grandma Sophie used to prepare a Sabbath meal? The story of our people, the stories of our tradition of Torah, of Talmud, of Midrash, of the prophets. Abraham's journey, Sarah's laugh, Moses' farewell address. These are our extended family tales and they are as important to our continued survival and identity as a people as the stories of our immediate family. If **we** don't know them, how will the generations to come?!

The synagogue can't teach of the relevance of the command *v'shinantan l'vanecha*, teach these things to your children, as well or with as much passion as a father or a mother, a Zadie or a Bubbie, can to the child that sits at their knee or who waits to be tucked in with a prayer and story at bedtime. No, the teaching is to be from generation to generation, *l'dor v'dor*, not only from an institution to a group of children on a Wednesday afternoon, after school and before homework; when it doesn't conflict with soccer.

When Moses told of the stories of the previous generation, when he told of the terror of slavery, when he told of the miracle at Sinai, when he told of the beauty of the first shabbat, the people who didn't **know** these things, **knew of** these things and they wept, they shuttered, they cried and they smiled, for they had made the journey through the footsteps of those who had come before them and they understood what a

miraculous journey it was and what it had taken to stand at this point over looking the Jordan, overlooking the holy land, on the brink of a new beginning.

We stand now each of us on the edge of our own Jordan, peering into the promised land, the promised land of an American Jewish community that is for one of the few times in our history free to worship, practice and live as we choose in a land of unfettered religious freedom and opportunity . We need these stories, those of our families and the stories of our people to help us and those who will come after us settle this land so we can make is a fertile and scared place, so we can fully appreciate what it took to come this far.

I urge you, beginning tonight, on the way home, over a late Shabbat dinner, tell the story of our people to your children, to your grandchildren, your spouse your friends, and if you don't know the detail, if you lack the nuance, the spice that makes it as rich and meaningful as when you describe the look on grandpa's face the moment he read that Coca-cola made its first million, then come study with us here, take a class in the community, by a book about Torah or the Jewish people, go get the spice, dive into and explore the detail. Because when the stories of our Jewish tradition, become for us as the stories of our grandparents, then our people and community will once again stand at Sinai to receive Torah, walk with Abraham and Issac up the mountain, sit at Moses' feet as he tells us of all we went through to reach the promised land.