GOING HOME
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

In this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, Moses is reviewing the history of the people and their journey. In speaking of the exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai he says, "but God had not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day."

In other words, in spite of all that the Israelites had been through, they didn't understand its meaning until they reach this moment, the end of the journey.

This past summer the TED Talks came to Vancouver after 10 years in Long Beach California. It was quite a boom for the lower mainland as hundreds of some of the most accomplished innovators, artists and business leaders came together for a week of 15 minutes presentations on the greatest ideas and insights of our time.

I didn't attend the talks, though I know someone who did – does that make me cooler?

But I tried to follow them, and the best we widely reported in the media.

One talk was by the recording artist Sting. Who by the way is a really smart man, he used to be a school teacher before he was a rock star, which in my view not only makes him, smart but also a legitimate hero – teachers are heroes. And then to go from teacher to Rock Star, well that just makes you really cool.

Sting got onstage and gave a presentation that was unique from the forward thinking approach of the conference. He talked about his rise to stardom and then about a period in middle age when he was unable to write any new songs. The muse abandoned him, he said — for days, then weeks, then months, then years.

But then he went back and started thinking about his childhood in the north of England. He'd lived on a street that led down to a shipyard where some of the world's largest ocean-going vessels were built.

Most of us have an urge, maybe more as we age, to circle back to the past and touch the places and things of childhood. When Sting did this, his creativity was reborn.

Songs exploded from his head.

David Brooks, the NY Times columnist reported that at TED, Sting sang some of those songs about that shipyard. He sang about the characters he remembers and his desire to get away from a life in that yard. These were songs from his musical "The Last Ship," which he's performed at The Public Theater and which is expected to arrive on Broadway in this fall.

Most TED talks are about the future, but Sting's was about going into the past. The difference between the two modes of thinking stood in stark contrast. In the first place, it was clear how much richer historical consciousness is than future vision. When we think about the future, we don't think about the texture and the tensions, the particular smells, shapes, conflicts — the dents in the floorboards. But Sting's songs were about unique and unlikely individuals and life as it really is, as a constant process of bending hard iron.

Historical consciousness has a fullness of paradox that future imagination cannot match. When we think of the past, we think about the things that seemed bad at the time but turned out to be good in the long run. We think about the little things that seemed inconsequential in the moment but made all the difference.

Then it was obvious how regenerating going home again can be. Sting, like most people who do this, wasn't going back to live in the past; he was circling back and coming forward.

It's what Moses meant when he said to the Israelites in this week's parasha, "but God had not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, until this day." The context adds, 'until now'. What is now, now is the moment they look back so that they can go forward. Now is the moment that their past informs their present and guides them toward their future.

There is no present without a past, and their can be no future without being grounded in who you are and where you came from.

Isn't that true for all of us?

When we go through our challenges and also when we experience joy, we see the world in which we live with different eyes. In order to appreciate the sacredness of life, it requires us to have open hearts, eyes and ears…if we close them, we will miss out on amazing and awesome possibilities.

Going back is a creative process. The events of childhood are like the Hebrew alphabet; the vowels are missing, and the older self has to make sense of them. Robert Frost's famous poem about the two paths diverging in the woods isn't only about the two paths. It also describes how older people go back in memory and impose narrative order on choices that didn't seem so clear at the time.

The person going back home has to invent a coherent tradition out of discrete moments and tease out future implications. He has to see the world with two sets of eyes: the eyes of his own childhood self and the eyes of his current adult self. He has to circle back deeper inside and see parts of himself that were more exposed then than now. No wonder the process of going home again of remembering can be so catalyzing.

The process of going home or remembering is also reorienting. Life has a way of blowing you off course. People have a way of forgetting what they originally set out to do. Going back means recapturing the original aspirations. That's one reason as Jews we go back to Exodus story every year, and why Moses and our tradition reference it in this parasha and time and time again in our liturgy. Every time you hear the phrase *Yitziat Mitzrayim* (your heard it in the Vahavatah, you'll hear it in the Kiddush in a few moment).

This week's Torah portion with its instructive observation that until they came through the narrowness of the desert and could look from freedom's shore on the journey they had been through they were without a knowing heart (biblical physiology placed the cognitive muscle in the heart not the brain). They were without and eyes to see, and ears to hear. Sting's talk and our parasha are a reminder that to go forward you have to look backward, you have to reflect and go deeper.

You are here tonight, on the cusp of a new year. The question who are you now and where are you going can only be answered and understood if first we ask and answer who were we then and where did we come from. Examine how you got from there to here and you will know where to go next and how to get there. In this New Year by looking back may we all be granted that greatest threefold blessing, a knowing heart, a seeing eye, a listening ear.