SACRED COWS

In a very poor place where there were no crops and no trees, a man lived with his wife, three young children and a thin, tired cow. A sage, a great teacher and his disciple, hungry and thirsty, stopped for a few hours and were well received. At one point, the sage asked: "This is a very poor place, far away from anything. How do you survive?"

"You see that cow? That's what keeps us going," said the head of the family. "She gives us milk; some of it we drink and some we make into cheese. When there is extra, we go into the city and exchange the milk and cheese for other types of food. That's how we survive."

The sage thanked them for their hospitality and then he and his student left. When he reached the first bend in the road, the sage said to his student: "Go back, get the cow, take her to the cliff in front of us, and push her off."

The student could not believe what he was hearing. "I cannot do that, teacher! How can you be so ungrateful? The cow is all they have. If I throw her off the cliff, the family will have no way to survive. Without the cow, they'll all die!"

The teacher took a deep breath and repeated the order: "Go ahead. Push the cow off the cliff."

Though outraged at what he was being asked to do, the student was resigned to obey his teacher. He returned to the hut and quietly led the animal to the edge of the cliff and pushed. The cow fell down the cliff and died.

As the years passed by, remorse for what he had done never left the student. One spring day, the guilt became too much to bear and he left the sage and returned to that little shack. He wanted to find out what had happened to that family, to help them out, apologize, or somehow make amends.

Upon rounding a turn in the road, he could not believe what his eyes were showing him. In place of the poor shack there was a beautiful house with trees all around, and children were playing in the yard.

The heart of the disciple froze. What could have happened to the family? Without a doubt, they must have been starving to death and forced to sell their land and leave. At that moment, the student thought: they must be begging on the street corners of some city. He approached the house and asked the man on the front step what had happened to the family who used to live there.

"We are still here," he said. The student was dumbfounded. He went over to the man and asked: "What happened? I was here with my teacher a few years ago and this was a miserable place. There was nothing. What did you do to improve your lives in such a short time?"

The man looked at the student, and replied with a smile: "We had a cow that kept us alive. She was all we had. But one day she fell down the cliff and died. To survive, we had to start doing other things, develop skills we didn't even know we had. And so, because we were forced to come up with new ways of doing things, we are now much better off than before."

How many of us have such cows in our lives? As kids, we depend on our parents a lot for everything. Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the time when we start taking real responsibility for ourselves, but how many of us actually do? Or even more, how many of us parents, allow our

kids the freedom to be responsible? Are we too involved in their lives to allow them to grow and develop?

Take homework for example – if you are a kid who needs your parents to remind you every day to do your homework, and you are 14 years old – I wonder what would happen if they stopped? You might get a bad grade, or you might actually realize that you are a super smart person and don't need to be reminded as you wish to achieve these things on your own. What lessons do we teach our children by doing their work for them?

It is a very fine balance for young people needing encouragement and direction and discipline and on the other side, parents wanting something for their kids that their kids don't want. We would all do well to look at our lives, both young and old to decide what cows need to be pushed off the edge so we can grow to be our full selves. Sometimes our dependency on something small and limited is the biggest obstacle to our growth. Perhaps the best thing each one of us can do is to push our "cow" off the cliff. Once we free ourselves of our cows, then our lives will really change.

But how do we do this? How do we learn to be self-sufficient? We, Jewish people, are lucky – we have a guide book – it is called the Torah. It is filled with directions of how to take responsibility for our selves.

This year is our Temple's 50th anniversary. It is a time of great joy for us and at the core of our synagogue is Torah. It is in that spirit, that as a celebration of our half century as a community, we are going to write a new Torah. You know from studying in school that if you write something down, you are much more likely to remember it than if you did not. So everyone, and I mean everyone, will have the chance to write in the Torah with our sofer, our scribe. He will be here five times during the year and all you need to do is sign up online for a special time with him to write our new Torah. Just think, you are going to help write the Torah from which you will read at your Bar/Bat Mitzvah. In so doing, you will push the cows of your life over the cliff and add a sense of purpose and meaning to all you do – no matter how old you are.

The ushers will pass out the information you need to sign up. Together, as community, we will grow the next 50 years, and you, our young people are our future. Embrace it for you are going to be responsible for it.