

**Drash by Incoming President Ora Prochovnick
June 2, 2006**

Shabbat Shalom,gut yontov.

I realized as I was preparing this drash - - that I was on the bima giving my very first drash exactly 36 years ago today. My bat mitzvah was celebrated on Shavuot, as I was born on erev Shavuot. My Saba, my grandfather, whose yahrzeit we're observing today, was born on Shavuot - so he used to tell me that this meant I was a day older than him. My strong ability in math, which caused this analysis of chronology to make perfect sense to me, no doubt causes you all some relief that it is Tony rather than myself who is being installed today as treasurer.

36 years, double chai, is clearly very auspicious. But in noticing this, I was especially excited by the possibility that I could just recycle that drash I wrote for my bat mitzvah, thereby saving myself a chunk of work. That's a sign of good presidential skills - techniques and strategies for time and workload management. But regrettably, the words I spoke at my bat mitzvah were not safely preserved and have been lost to posterity. This is a shame, because I have long thought that I reached my intellectual peak at about the age of 13. It really could have worked to just copy that original drash, because as I prepared for today I realized that the themes I spoke about on that day 36 years ago are exactly what make sense for today.

I spoke of the connection between the story of Ruth, why it has become our tradition to read that story on Shavuot, z'man matan torahteinu - the celebration of our receiving the Torah, and my own bat mitzvah. The connections are of course strong and obvious. The setting of the Megilat Ruth story is at harvest time, and Shavuot celebrates the harvest of first fruits. More significantly, because of her great love for Naomi and feeling of connection, Ruth made a life-time commitment to Naomi and to the Jewish people. Ruth's famous words of devotion are the

best known passage in the story, and with the recitation of those beautiful words Ruth sealed her covenantal relationship with Naomi and to Judaism:

Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live; your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

This beautiful megillah is read on Shavuot because the story can be seen as analogous to the Israelite's acceptance of the covenant at Sinai. The Jewish people's receipt of the torah and acceptance of a life of mitzvot - was an act of commitment and entry into a covenantal relationship. And then of course, on my bat mitzvah, I was choosing to enter into my own personal committed relationship - learning to connect on my own terms to Judaism, as a young adult. So you can get the gist of my lost drash of 36 years back. (I guess at the age of 13 the subtle influences on my life that were being created by a story of passionate love between 2 women, and a subsequent known donor insemination, when Boaz impregnated Ruth and the child was raised by her and Naomi, were lost on me - but that's for another drash...)

The same themes, those connecting Ruth to Shavuot to my bat mitzvah, are at play today as well - in accepting this office of president, along with my fellow officers and Va'ad members who were installed today, I am entering into a committed covenantal relationship - with my community - with Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, with the URJ and the greater Jewish community, with my fellow synagogue leaders, with the Eternal.

And like Ruth, who was brought to her commitment by her love of Naomi, and like the 13yr old me, who's connections to Judaism were in part formed by the love of my parents and family - my path today to covenantal relationship was also carved out by loving relationship and teachers. There is the remarkable ground work laid by Sha'ar Zahav's founders and the series of

devoted presidents and synagogue leaders who preceded me - including those who participated in the installation ceremony today in passing the Torah, and most especially Arthur - who has been such an incredible mentor and role model. And there has been all of you, the members of Sha'ar Zahav who have been so warm, and supportive and loving as I've grown with you, and over the years have become my family. And Rabbi Angel, who I have come to admire so much, and look forward to working with over the coming years and deepening our relationship.

A lovely midrash in connection with the holiday of Shavuot speaks of the moment of revelation at Sinai as being the wedding between the Eternal and the People of Israel, with the Torah serving as the ketubah. And just as Ruth was moved to commit to the Jewish people because of her love, I feel that my love of so many people in this congregation has moved me to recommit, to renew my vows in this new way.

Of course there's another midrash which speaks of how God delayed giving the Torah -- it was not given immediately after the exodus from Egypt, but 50 days later, so as not to appear like a groom who jumps too hastily into marriage. And I've had my own time delays... I resisted for years when people suggested I consider being CSZ's president, and then I even got Arthur to serve an extra year as president to delay this marriage.

The connection mentioned in this midrash between the exodus and Shavuot reminds us that the revelation at Sinai which we commemorate today is not an event which stands alone - it was the culmination of the exodus from Egypt. The two occurrences are inseparably linked, as we literally experience through our daily counting of the omer between Pesach and Shavuot. As this count down demonstrates, or more appropriately this "count up," - revelation and redemption are inextricably connected.

In the same vein, at the end of the reading of Megilat Ruth we are told that Ruth is a direct ancestor of King David and the Davidic line, meant to culminate in the Messiah, is a symbol of world transformation and redemption.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, in his writing *The Book of Words*, has a wonderful teaching about geulah, redemption: He speaks about when he was a young boy growing up in Detroit - which because I've been thinking about my bat mitzvah, harkened back to my memories as a child in Chicago. Like Rabbi Kushner's mother, my parents also always shopped at certain grocery stores, gas stations and markets because they gave out S & H Green Stamps - although we also collected plaid stamps. Others of my era, and those older than me, no doubt remember these as well. They were the grocery store precursors of frequent flier miles. I've seen in recent articles that the s&h company still exists, and is trying to function on the internet with what they call "green points" but it's not at all the same thing - in part because it misses the important tactile experience. The stamps came in small perforated and gummed sheets and were given out by the stores in proportion to each dollar spent. After we came home from shopping it was my and my siblings' job to lick the stamps and paste them into little newsprint booklets - perhaps the continuous exposure to the glue on those stamps explains a lot about my brother and sisters' and my current mental state. We kept the booklets fat with stamps in a shoe box on the upper shelf of the front hall closet (remarkably that's where R. Kushner's were stored as well, and in a recent conversation, I've learned Dev Noily's family's also, so I guess that's just where they belonged). When the shoe box was full we would have a family meeting to discuss the possibilities and then we would take the box full of books and books, filled with sticky, saliva encrusted stamps, to the local S & H Green Stamp **Redemption Center**. And at the Redemption

Center you could exchange this basically worthless stash of stickum for something of more enduring value like a carpet sweeper, or a casserole dish or a toaster.

As Rabbi Kushner taught, this is the true meaning of redemption: not being saved - but the experience of being transformed into something entirely different. It is why redemption and revelation are inseparable in Jewish history.

The Israelites at Sinai knew that they would be receiving a whole new code of living, their entire conception of life and destiny would be altered, but they had no way of knowing what this new mission would entail.

And I must confess, I feel a little like that as I embark on my presidency. Like Ruth making her commitment of faith and allegiance to Naomi, like our people at Sinai - I am making a commitment, entering into relationship. And like the Israelites at Sinai, I and my fellow officers know there will be a large body of information transferred to us, a new set of responsibilities with a new world outlook. And I know that we will learn so much, and be gifted with so much, from this leadership experience, that like those green stamps, we will be unalterably transformed.

As we observe together the festival of Shavuot, which celebrates the gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is also worthwhile recalling that the revelation was a public event. From this we learn that Torah can only be received and transmitted if there is a commanding sense of communal belonging and responsibility. This is a message I hope to carry with me throughout my presidency. The voice of God is heard through the many voices of the Jewish people as a whole, through the collective sense of the community, even as it was at Sinai. And so I hope to

hear from each of you, and bring your voices together, as we do the sacred work of our community at Sha'ar Zahav.

Each year at Shavuot, when as a community we study torah together and remember our moment together at Sinai, it is as if we renew our vows and recommit to our covenantal relationship. And we remind ourselves of this through the reading of the Book of Ruth, as she makes a vow of commitment to Naomi, and through her to the Jewish people and God.

Although the name of this holiday, Shavuot, is usually translated to mean "weeks," it is a homonym, the Hebrew word can also be understood to mean oaths or vows. And on behalf of the officers I pledge to you, as taught to me by Ruth: Wherever you go as we work together in the coming years, I will go, your community will be my community, your People will be my People, your movement my movement, your Rabbi my Rabbi, and your shul my shul.

And as I make this commitment, I am mindful that recommitting to our relationship with Judaism is what we all do - like Ruth, like the Israelites at Sinai, like the 13 year old version of me, we are all Jews by choice. So I ask each of you to choose to be committed in your own way in the coming year. And I ask this not just because of the terror of being an incoming president and my hope that I'll have all of your help and support, but because of how meaningful it will be for each of you to renew your covenant, and become active and engaged in Judaism and in Sha'ar Zahav in a way that will work for you. I look forward to conversations with as many of you as possible in the coming months about what work of the congregation you would like to become more involved in, what will draw you in, re-commit you.

May this Shavuot – and the day after, and the day after that – include a personal moment when we all each receive the Torah. Chag sameach and Shabbat Shalom.