March 17, 2006
Ki Tissa
Drash on the Occasion of
Jay Soloway's 50th Birthday

Rabbi Edwards, Cantorial Soloist Chalin, BCC leadership, Mom, Dad, Grace, Michael, family, friends, fellow congregants:

Today I am a man...eligible for membership in AARP.

I thank the powers that be at BCC who have allowed me to mark this momentous birthday by delivering tonight's drash. As you might imagine, arriving at a milestone birthday like this one has generated in me a flood of thoughts about aging, the meaning of life, those things I have accomplished and experienced thus far in my existence, what remains for me to accomplish and experience, what mark I have made on the world and what mark the world has made on me. These thoughts have led me to something very important I wish to say tonight, which I will get to in a little while.

Little did I know when I asked Rabbi Edwards to address the congregation tonight that this week's Torah reading is Ki Tissa, which relates an episode that takes place soon following the Jews' departure from Egypt.

From this week's Torah portion we learn that while Moses is atop Mount Sinai receiving the word of G-d, the children of Israel down below panic and create the Golden Calf, before which they worship and conduct themselves in a rather unseemly manner. When Moses descends from the mountain top and sees what is happening, he throws down the set of tablets and shatters them. The Israelites quickly regret what they have done and make atonement, after which Moses again ascends to the top of Mount Sinai and again receives the word of G-d on two fresh tablets. When Moses descends with the tablets from Mount Sinai this time, his face radiates a brilliant light because he has just spoken with G-d.

It's quite a story and contains a considerable amount of fascinating detail which I have omitted here for the sake of brevity. Let's take a step back from the very specific events contained in this week's Torah portion, though, and take a look at the broader story of the Exodus: the Jewish people's enslavement in Egypt, their sudden release and departure, the parting of the Red Sea and its crossing by the Children of Israel, their forty years of wandering in the desert and their ultimate arrival in the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land.

We tell the story of the departure from Egypt, of course, at Passover, and Passover has always been a holiday for which I have felt a special affinity. I find the story of the Exodus, more so than any other story from our ancient history, one that can readily serve as a metaphor for experiences from our own time, be they ones we have undergone as a people, or ones we have lived through on an individual basis. Beyond that, I was born a week before Passover. Thankfully, I don't remember it, but my bris was on the morning of the day of the first Passover Seder of 1956.

Many of you have heard Rabbi Lisa talk about how we each have our own Egypt, our own enslavement of one sort or another, be its source external or from within ourselves. In the

Christian tradition, this is commonly known as "one's cross to bear," alluding to how Jesus bore the heavy burden of carrying the tool of his own execution to Calvary. Maybe I am a little prejudiced here, but I relate to the metaphor of having one's own Egypt a whole lot more than the one of having one's cross to bear. We all know how the story involving the cross concludes. In the Jewish tradition, however, the burden—our version of Egypt, whatever its nature—is thrown off, and arrival at some new station of promise is the happy conclusion to the suffering we have borne.

My grandparents and their parents had their Egypt, living a difficult hardscrabble life in the shetls of Eastern Europe, my father's parents in Russia and my mother's in Lithuania. They lived in fear of religious persecution and pogroms. I suspect they lived their lives almost entirely focused on survival, working hard to maintain the mere basics of food, clothing and shelter. I imagine they had little in the way of even the simplest pleasures of life we take for granted today. Perhaps most troublesome of all, I conjecture they lived with a sense that tomorrow could not be any better than today.

Unless, of course, they took drastic measures. Migrating to America was such a drastic measure, but it held tremendous promise. I cannot fathom the courage and bravery it took for my forebears to choose to leave behind all with which they were familiar, for better or worse, in order to move to a new and unknown place. A place, as the folklore has it, where the streets were paved with gold—a latter day Promised Land.

By stepping onto those ships that transported them to the New World nearly 100 years ago, my grandparents were reliving the experience of their forebears as they stepped onto the dry bottom of the Red Sea.

When they arrived in America, they learned, of course, that the streets were not paved with gold. My grandparents found themselves in a strange new place, unable to speak the language and no doubt dumbfounded by the density and noise and pace of the urban environment in which they found themselves. Human beings being what they are, I am confident there were moments when my grandparents questioned their decision to come to America and entertained doubts about their ability to survive in their new and very foreign surroundings.

Unlike the Israelites waiting for Moses to descend from Mount Sinai, however, my grandparents did not create a Golden Calf—or some metaphoric version of one. They stayed true to their faith and their hope for a better life.

My grandparents' forty years of wandering in the desert took the form of adapting to their new home, working hard, saving their pennies and learning to speak, read and write English. Eventually they became more settled, had children—that would be my parents—and their children had children—that would be my brothers and me.

My grandparents' homes—they lived in modest apartments—were filled with yiddishkeit and a tremendous joy that was centered on family. I remember Passover Seders where the table was so long it literally extended from one room into another. My grandparents took heed of G-d's command to keep the Sabbath holy. My Dad's mother—she was "Bubbeh"—had removed the light bulb from her refrigerator so she wouldn't inadvertently turn it on—an act that might be characterized as "work"—when she opened the refrigerator

door on Shabbat. My Mom's mother—she was "Grandma"—baked a fresh challah and made chicken soup every Friday afternoon for Shabbat dinner that night, and left a small flame burning on the stove overnight Friday and all day Saturday so she wouldn't need to make fire on the Sabbath. These are fond memories, and I am grateful to have them.

There must have been a day when my grandparents looked back and realized that after all their hard work and sacrifice they had at last arrived in the Promised Land. I like to wonder what milestone my grandparents might have viewed as concrete evidence of that arrival. Was it when they first went to a synagogue in their new home? Was it the day they became citizens of the United States? Maybe it was the day their children—my parents—graduated from college.

Of course, my grandparents were not alone during this journey, as they were part of a great wave of immigration to this country at the beginning of the 20th century. I am sure they took great strength from the sense of community they had with their fellow Ashkenazic immigrants. Whether you view it as a melting pot or a tossed salad, my grandparents and their fellow Eastern European Jews joined the immigrants of that era from Italy, Ireland, Greece, Poland and many other places to create the vibrant and colorful metropolis that was New York at that time.

I honor my grandparents' generation tonight, and their legacy, and thank them for some of the traditions they passed on to us that have become embedded in our lives. I thank them for the ability to simultaneously participate in six animated conversations over a single dinner table. I thank them for the notion that if there's brisket on the table, it must be yontif. I thank them for bagels and lox on Sunday morning.

I also thank them for the values they instilled in my parents.

By the time each of my parents turned 50 years of age, their parents—my grandparents—had already passed away. Both my parents are with me here tonight, and for this I feel lucky and profoundly grateful.

Needless to say, the nature of my relationship with my parents has evolved over time, shifting in dynamic as I moved from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood and now to middle age, just as they transitioned from young parenthood to older parenthood to, well, even older parenthood.

Thanks to the upbringing I received from my parents, I have grown into an adult who has lived a fiercely independent life, making my own choices and developing a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is moral and what is not

Like many Jewish parents of their generation, my parents encouraged me to excel in school and take advantage of a wide variety of educational and cultural experiences as I was growing up. They taught me to aim high in life, and I am proud of the many accomplishments I have achieved.

Were there times when I disagreed with my parents? Of course.

Were there times when we argued? Yes.

Were there times when I gave them gray hair? Uh-huh.

Were there times when they gave me gray hair? Yewbetcha.

Was there ever a time when they withheld from me even an iota of their love? No.

Was there ever a time when I didn't have their complete emotional and moral support? Not one.

Was there ever a time when they were not proud to call me their son? Never

My gratitude for all this and everything else my parents provided me knows no bounds.

Indeed, expressing gratitude is at the heart of what I wish to share with you tonight.

Though I tend to avoid generalizations, I am going to make one now. People—you, me, everybody—people take way too much for granted. We tend not to place even a modicum of thought into many of the elements of our existence that in another context—say, that of the life my grandparents led—would be central to our thought and behavior.

For example, I walked into this sanctuary this evening under my own power, and for that I am grateful.

I can see, hear, smell, taste and touch, and for each of those magnificent senses I am grateful, too.

I am grateful for my public school, junior high school and high school teachers who nurtured my ability to think critically and kept me challenged, encouraging me to stretch intellectually and explore and discover and learn and grow.

I am grateful for having had the tremendous experience in college that life afforded me. I majored in English and comparative literature and by way of the great books I read I tasted the tea and madeleine in Proust's great novel, fought with the ancient Greeks in Homer's account of the Peloponnesian Wars, navigated the Mississippi River with Huck Finn, suffered Madame Bovary's overwhelming ennui, hunted the great whale with Ahab, sat on the heath with King Lear and spent a day in Dublin with Leopold Bloom. In my other courses I explored history, psychology, language, great music, great art and much, much more. I consciously sensed my transition from adolescence to adulthood in college, and it was while I was in college that I forged a profound friendship with one of my classmates that, despite great physical distance between us, has grown stronger and stronger over the years and will last, I have no doubt, for as long as we both are alive.

Professionally, I am grateful for the solid education in business I received in graduate school. Over the years, my career has taken a number of twists and turns, and I am lucky to take claim to at least a couple of stages in my career when I performed well and worked in an environment to which I looked forward to coming every day. I developed numerous individual friendships with co-workers during those times, too, and am happy to say that many of those friendships continue to this day, transcending the physical and temporal

boundaries of the workplace.

Whatever your opinion of the current administration—and you can probably figure out mine—I am grateful to be living in a democracy where I can cast my vote unimpeded, speak what is on my mind, and practice my religion freely. And I am doubly grateful that it is with the wonderful community of BCC that I affiliate myself in the exercise of my faith.

Policies like Don't Ask Don't Tell and laws like the absurdly named Defense of Marriage Act notwithstanding, I am grateful to live during an era and in a place in which I am able to live my life as an openly gay man.

Many of you know I am a great devotee of the performing arts, and I am grateful for the sizable number of moving and provocative operatic, symphonic, theatrical and terpsichorean performances I have seen and heard over the years.

I have experienced the sheer exhilaration of completing a lengthy and nearly vertical hike and arriving at the crest of a waterfall in Yosemite National Park and I have enjoyed the complete—and I mean complete—serenity of floating in the crystalline waters of a natural freshwater pool in Hawaii. For these experiences, and their memory, I am grateful.

I have had the pleasure of falling completely head-over-heels ga-ga for someone special and being loved in return I am happy to report that I have been in such a blissful state for the last sixteen months and for this I am extremely grateful.

I could go on and on, as I have a lot for which to be grateful. Please don't think I have lived my life wearing rose-colored glasses, though. No one has truly lived without experiencing setbacks, disappointments and hardships, me included. There is much in the world, too, that is disturbing and frightening for which I am not so grateful. That war and hunger and disease and racism and religious oppression and political corruption and inhumanity persist in our world at all, much less to the degree they do, is disheartening, indeed.

One of the key tenets of our faith is tikkun olam, or repair of the world. It is our duty to actively attempt to leave the world in a better condition than the one in which we found it.

Being sensitive to the troubles of the world and performing tikkun olam does not prevent us, however, from pausing now and then—and maybe doing so on a frequent basis is a better idea—to inventory the things in our life for which we are grateful.

An Ashkenazic immigrant who arrived in America but a few years before my grandparents did made a good life for himself writing songs that have taken a prominent place in what we call the Great American Songbook. His name was Israel Beilin, though he's better known to us as Irving Berlin. One of his songs is particularly germane to my message tonight and it holds a special place in my heart. The lyrics, though they may be quite simple, carry considerable significance. In part, they go like this:

If you're worried and you can't sleep
Just count your blessings instead of sheep
And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings

Tonight I've made attempt to publicly count at least a few of my blessings. I have many, many more. I am grateful for each one, big or small, recent or from my growingly distant youth or any time in between. To share these thoughts with you tonight, on the occasion of my arrival at a half century on Earth, is a blessing unto itself. I feel your love and good wishes for me in this sanctuary tonight, and for that I am most grateful, too.

Heaven knows I am no Moses, yet like Moses when he descended from Mount Sinai the second time, I feel I surely must be aglow this evening. Aglow with joy and pride and good mazel. I thank you for sharing these moments with me, and I wish you a Shabbat Shalom.