

Beth Chayim Chadashim
Los Angeles
Drash by Student Rabbi Daniel Mikelberg
Nov. 17, 2006 Parashat Hayyei Sarah

Time to Dialogue

By a show of hands, how many people in the room own ipods? I presently have 3025 songs stored on my ipod. If I were to start listening to my ipod this minute, in a week's time, I would still be here attached to my earphones. To be exact, I have enough music stored to last for 7 and a half days. I am probably the only one here, well except maybe for Josh, who has over 500 liturgical melodies stored on his ipod. Yes, that does mean that you may find me jamming to the mah tovu if you see me driving next to you. We belong to the ipod generation! As members of the ipod generation, our musical resources are endless, however, we enjoy these musical resources, in large part, by ourselves. We download our music, alone! We enjoy our personally catered playlists, alone! We plug our ipods into our cars, alone! As we place the headphones onto our ears, we block out the world around us, focusing on our own space, ignoring the reality in our midst. The dominant ways of our current society teach us to emphasize our self needs. Our nifty ipods play right into this model, physically removing us away from the gifts of the greater community. Does anyone know the definition of idiot? It is the one who is focused on only him or herself! With an emphasis on the personal id, the community is left behind.

Two weeks ago, I traveled to the Bay Area for three days of training focusing on community organizing. Based on the concept of telling stories, community organizing brings together individuals and groups in dialogue, sharing experiences of vulnerabilities and injustices. Community organizing pushes the community to really engage one another, learning about passions and interests, finding a means to act on these concerns once identified. Our synagogue community, Jewish community, Los Angeles community and world community can seem so vast, and yet we are all connected together in a web of commonalities, dreams and concerns. Our Torah portion this week is a model for reaching out of our self focused worlds. Abraham yearned to find a wife for his son Isaac. He sends his senior servant on a mission. A daunting task, the servant expresses concerns to Abraham, stating: *What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land?* Abraham is confident in his words, responding: *God will send an angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there.* Nearing Abraham's homeland, the servant devised a plan. He had the camels kneel alongside a well, just at the time when the women came out for water. He prayed for guidance in locating Isaac's bashert. From a distance came a beautiful maiden named Rebekkah. She went down to the spring, and brought up a jar of water. Longing for the correct pick up line, the servant approached and asks to drink from her jug of water. Recognizing the thirst of this man and his camels, Rebekkah volunteers to return to the spring to draw more water. Admiring Rebekkah's kindness and hospitality, the servant knew that this was the right woman for Isaac. Rebekkah encountering Abraham's servant at the well is a key story that is repeated three times in this portion. First the narrative voice speaks of the event. Second, the servant speaks first hand of the story to Rebekkah's family, revealing his faith, fears and yearnings. Finally, the text suggests that the servant repeats the story again to Isaac as he explains how he came upon the beautiful Rebekkah. This Torah portion embodies the great power of story telling! From stories such as these, we see the strength in narrative in revealing our legacies, our challenges, and our aspirations.

During this retreat 2 weeks ago, a number of us stepped out for an evening of dancing in San Francisco. I took a Tango lesson with a young woman from the conference. After the dance, she says to me: *Wow, I did not know that Rabbis could dance!* We began to chat and soon discovered we had

many common bonds. Jenny lives in Maywood but her family was all born in Mexico. She married her high school sweetheart and is presently raising their 2 year old daughter. Her mother takes care of her daughter during the day, as Jenny works full time as a high school teacher. Attending this retreat, she longed to identify means to strengthen her community. She's proud of her American identity, and yet she is quite concerned that she will lose her Mexican heritage. For instance, her younger brother speaks only minimal Spanish. Her story made me think: living in America, how can I bridge my Jewish priorities with my national concerns? How does my minority status shape my views? As a family, how do we look out for one another? How can my community be strengthened? All this realization stemming from a simple Tango! From Jenny's narrative, I learned much about my own story! Yesterday we heard from Gideon Hirscher of the challenges facing the Israeli Ethiopian community as well as some of their recent triumphs. For hundreds of years, this community had been practicing pre-Talmudic Judaism in Ethiopia. Their prayers pointed to Jerusalem as they dreamed of one day reaching the holy land. Just as they traveled on foot for long distances in the desert so they could be airlifted to Israel from the Sudan, so too do we read of the Israelites wandering in the desert in search of better times. Both wanderers strived to carve out a place of improved safety and comfort for themselves and future generations. Their struggles are our struggles and these struggles continue. Gideon shared with us a number of passionate stories about his dedicated work with the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel and in Ethiopia. Focusing on education, Gideon provided some very difficult statistics. As recently as 1998, almost half of Israeli-Ethiopian children were being held back a second year in Kindergarden. Only 19% of Israeli-Ethiopian youngsters were able to pass the Israeli high-school matriculation exam. These stories of hardships leave us with many challenges ahead. Gideon left us with words of hope. In 2005, only 2% of Israeli Ethiopian Kindergardeners are held back, the same statistic as the overall Israeli population. His work represents getting to really know the intimate stories of the Israeli Ethiopian population. In doing so, we can address their unique needs as a united community. Ruach Chayim is an example of the magic that can happen when we share music with one another. Our ear plugs are removed as we harmonize our voices together. These voices are unique, often representing differing passions, struggles and aspirations, yet these voices come together in a special blend of sacred notes. Today, as we sing together, let us look around the room. We are a community that knows how to really welcome one another, build bridges and establish meaningful relationships. Let me suggest that we can become even closer. For the week ahead, my challenge to all of us is to approach 2 people who we do not know. After the usual niceties, let's pursue really meaningful conversation on important topics. What do you struggle with? Who's legacy do you live with? What are your priorities? How can I stand with you? May we be blessed on our path as we yearn to understand our covenantal responsibilities of embracing the other, moving forward hand in hand, engaging in meaningful dialogue and accepting our place in a loving and caring community.