

**Beth Chayim Chadashim  
Los Angeles**

**Bat Mitzvah Drash  
May 5, 2001  
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I believe that there are no coincidences...for example, why is it that gas prices have suddenly soared now that a bunch of oilmen are running the government?? No, I believe that everything happens for a reason, "b'sharet" in Hebrew. What I don't know is why things happen, but I believe there is a reason and at some point that is revealed to us. Why did I want to become bat mitzvah and why did I have the parsha I have read today?

I must confess that I'm not entirely sure why I am standing here becoming bat mitzvah; maybe it is "talis envy" - of the males who had become bar mitzvah when I was 13. Maybe it is mid-life crisis and I want to be 13 again - well, maybe not! But I will say this, I have studied Judaism on and off for much of my life and it has been a continual source of inspiration, some perspiration, like today. But much of Judaism is a struggle. A struggle to understand what is being said especially since most of it is in a foreign language. A struggle to get meaning. A struggle to gain insight. I've often identified with Jacob who had to wrestle with the angel of Gd to find his answers.

So too I have struggled in life. I mean who among us hasn't?? But through my life, my greatest challenge has been to make peace within myself as a result of struggles I've had with other people. That's where b'sheret comes in. I had to delve into this torah portion so I could gain insight that I need. Now I feel that I have found a way to help myself; Good bye shrink!!

These are the words I chanted in Torah:

1. Do not render an unfair decision
2. Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich
3. Judge your neighbor fairly
4. Do not stand idly by if your neighbor is in danger (literally on the blood of your neighbor)
5. Do not hate your kinsman in your heart
6. Reprove your neighbor but incur no guilt for doing so
7. Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk
8. Love your neighbor as yourself

In studying these words, I saw that they are basic precepts to live by: how to deal fairly, kindly and courageously with and for others in thought and deed. Verse 18 is the passage "love your neighbor as yourself", often cited as the essence of Judaism, which today, Helen will make as a whole drash itself.

These mitzvot, commandments, did not originate in the 21st century but thousands of years ago. Perhaps if more people studied and took them to heart, fewer would commit crimes or need therapy. But that's another drash....

I asked myself, are these words really the essence of Judaism; What is the essence of Judaism and why is that important?

Rabbi Joseph Telushin in his Jewish Wisdom, quotes that according to Isaiah, the 613 mitzvot can be boiled down to 2 principals:

- Do justice
- Carry out acts of righteousness or charity

And finally, in one principle cited in the Talmud:

- "the righteous shall live according to his/her faith, or as it could be stated today, "walk the walk"

Each of these basic principles appear in my parsha. And throughout the Torah deeds of lovingkindness are repeatedly commanded. You may recall that during the Days of Awe and especially Yom Kippur, we learn that Gd does not forgive us until we make peace with and forgive one another first.

But I continued to ask myself, WHY? What is the purpose of doing the right and good thing? Aren't there many people who do unkind things and survive or even thrive? What is the essence of the essence?

I think I came across the answer in a LA Times article last Shabbat on author TC Boyle. Boyle likes to write about the base and absurd side of human nature. According to the article Boyle is quoted summing up his world view as, "everything is absurd because you have to die. There is no point in living. We could go with platitudes like 'do unto others'... but really it comes down to being an animal, living and dying".

What if he is right and we are all doomed? If so, it is ironic that he is selling a lot of books purporting "don't bother", "it makes no difference."

But then the article goes on to describe Boyle's real-world life. He is depicted as a thoughtful and supportive husband and father, who helps around the house and takes pride in his historic home and garden. In short, he is someone who loves his family and does deeds of lovingkindness. Boyle's example helped me to answer the question of "why bother". It is only when we are doing good and right things with and for others does life have any meaning. Deeds of kindness, speaking well and loving others are ways to make the most of the precious little time we have in this life. This is the central message that Judaism offers and I see that it is the central message of a life well lived.

In the end, we are each only a reflection of the impact we have had on others, both good and bad. We can easily go through the motions of life and not become engaged with friends family and others, but what a dull and narrow life that would be. We need others to become all that we can be.

I think the rabbis understood this when they put forth the simple but powerful concept of how we deal with one another as the essence of Judaism and the essence of creating a rewarding life with fulfillment and meaning.

This parsha made me reflect on how I interact with others on a daily basis. The kindnesses and the slights. The gossip and the honest study. The promises made and those unfilled. All of it. The bottom line is I can do a lot better. But at the same time, I must give myself credit for some good I have done. I see more clearly that each little thing, positive and negative adds up to the sum total being kept by the big CPA in the sky. This parsha presented me with both a challenge to do better and some simple guidelines for how to get there. So that's how I know there are no coincidences, because I got these wonderful words to study and take to heart. I hope I can walk the walk.

I could not have done any of this were it not for the teachers who worked with me and the class self-lessly over the past months. Fran with her patience and Yiddish, even with Eli or Rae begging for her attention, was always there. Danke Fran. Bob, too, even as a now published author, was there giving us Hebrew and trope lessons, always encouraging and saying "Yea, you can do it!" Thanks Bob. And Lisa, who worked with us on Torah and drashes and anything else we may have needed, is a guiding light. Todah Lisa.

I also want to specially thank my partner Lana who always asked how it was coming, and what I was learning and lovingly supported me. Others who are here today; my cousins Luella and Mark from New York, my home away from home; my adopted parents Sadie and Hy and my "inlaws" Steve and Claudia from the valley and our precious niece and nephew Beth and Peter. . And to the many friends here thank you for making this a most special day.