

Rabbi Lisa Edwards
BCC August 1, 2008
14th anniversary at BCC
Parashat Mas'ei
Rosh Chodesh Av

This Shabbat we finish reading the Book of Numbers, B'midbar, which ends in this week's Torah portion, Mas'ei, with a summary of all the places the Israelites encamped during their 40 years in the wilderness. As we noted at Torah study last night, when Torah presents that list it says "these are the stopping places during the journeyS of the Israelites..." not during "the journey" but during "the journeys" because even though we all went as group through the wilderness, from Egypt to the Promised Land, each of us also – as always in life – takes our own individual journeys. So this seemed a good framework from which to spend a few minutes this evening reflecting on our life together for the last 14 years since Tracy and I arrived back in LA to become rebbetz and rabbi at BCC.

Some of you know that the car I drive belonged to my mother, Claire, until she died in 2001, t'l. And though Tracy and I inherited her car in 2002, the car itself is vintage 1994 – the same year we came to BCC.

The car, like all the cars in my family, had more than one owner – it began as my cousin Mary's car, and then became my Aunt Bege's car and then became my mother's car and then mine... sometimes different relatives were involved, but most of the cars my mother or father or brother or I ever owned came to us through my Aunt Bege (her memory too is a blessing) and her "hobby" of re-arranging the ownership of cars within our extended family. I tell you this to say that the car is a little fancier than one we could have afforded or might have picked for ourselves were we picking for ourselves. And since it's a 1994 it's a good reminder of what was "state of the art" when we arrived at BCC – for example, it has a cassette player but not a cd player, it had a "car phone" wired into it with separate antenna – remember those car phones that predated cell phones? You can press a button to find out the air temperature outside, as well as a thermostat to set the temperature you want inside. And it has side view mirrors on both sides of the car that are adjustable with a touch of a button from the driver's seat (I remember that being an exciting addition to my driving repertoire). And the right side mirror has that familiar phrase printed in light letters at the bottom: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear."

I used to have a message on my computer screensaver that played off that phrase. It read:

"Warning: Dates on the calendar are closer than they appear"

So it used to be that every day I reflected on how time flies. But more recently I've noticed that time passes too quickly for me to notice how quickly time passes!, and so it takes something like an anniversary to catch me up short and invite me to reflect a little on the passage of time. Of course when I do that I always immediately have the words of Grace Paley echoing in my head on that subject. After 14 years together many of you know that Grace Paley is one of my favorite writers – and over the years – and especially when she died just a year ago in August, I've read you from her work.

Since it's our anniversary, I hope you'll indulge me and let me read to you again about time passing from Grace Paley's very short story called, "Wants."

[read from "wants" – first few paragraphs – up to "I should have had them to dinner."]

All this summer with all the weddings of couples who have been together for SO MANY YEARS we've been noticing how time passes – looking at all the photos of weddings past, for example, and seeing how much younger we looked!!!! Harriet Perl is always apologizing to me that our congregation has turned my hair gray – but guess what? Not prematurely gray – so I guess I can't really blame you guys!!!

This past week at my Rabbi's Summer Film Festival we watched the 1984 documentary "The Times of Harvey Milk" and afterwards reminisced about the 1978 Briggs Initiative that – had it passed – would have fired every gay and lesbian teacher teaching in a California public school at the time. Harriet Perl was there on Wed. watching the film, and she was teaching in at Hamilton High School back in 1978 (aside: Assembly Speaker Karen Bass was one of her students). We noted on Wed. how we'd gone from that dreaded ballot initiative to marriage for same sex couples!

ISN'T IT AMAZING?????

Time doesn't just fly, it does also bring change, but then of course we also noted that even as we're engaged this summer in wedding after blessed wedding, we're also engaged in efforts to defeat yet another ballot initiative – Prop 8 (or Prop Hate as some call it – H8) -- the one that would call a halt to all these splendid legal weddings. And the successful campaign then against the Briggs Initiative is very similar to our campaign now to save marriage – person-to-person, door-to-door, wedding by wedding, people coming out to everyone they know and asking their help in stopping yet another attempt to remove rights from people – in this case a first attempt to use the state constitution as a tool to take rights away from some people instead of to give rights equally to all people.

And in the "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" category -- "the more things change, the more they stay the same" we might also note that, like Harvey Milk and SF Mayor Moscone, lgbt people and our allies are still being murdered for coming out for human rights. In October this year we'll mark the 10th anniversary of the murder of Matthew Shepherd, and yet this week brings with it the sad and horrifying news of more such murders:

Wednesday, Colorado police announced that Allen Ray Andrade, 31, faces murder charges for the brutal slaying of Angie Zapata, a 21-year-old transwoman living in Greeley, just 50 miles north of Jewish Mosaic's national office in Denver. According to the police, Andrade became enraged after discovering that Zapata was transgender and allegedly beat her to death with a fire extinguisher, referring to his alleged victim as 'it'. Over 200 people turned out for Zapata's funeral July 23, at which her sister, Monica, told the press that "all [Angie] wanted was to be beautiful."

On Sunday, July 27, Jim D. Adkisson allegedly walked into a Unitarian church in Knoxville, Tennessee, during a children's performance of the musical "Annie" and opened fire with a sawed-off shotgun, killing Greg McKendry and Linda Kreager and seriously wounding seven other congregants. His reason for the attack, as outlined in a four-page letter police found in his car, was his hatred of the church's liberal advocacy, in particular, its dedication to LGBT inclusion. The congregation's president reportedly told the press that the church "[has] a little

sign in the front window that says, 'Everyone Welcome,' and a rainbow flag." And then added: "And that, or something like that, is going to stay" [in the front window of our church].
[from JewishMosaic e-mail: Friday, Aug. 1, 2008 / 29 Tammuz, 5768]

In rabbinical school they were always reminding us that change comes hard – to individuals, to congregations, to communities, to society, to the world. And sometimes it takes looking at a sweep of history to see change does indeed happen.

In this week's Torah portion, Mas'ei, we see something that often happens – "change, change back" – as the rights newly won by the 5 daughters of Zelophehad just two Torah portions ago – get modified here at the end of the Book of Numbers so that while the women still get to inherit land, they are restricted in their choice of men to marry lest they take their inheritance away from their tribe of origin. It's a good reminder of many things – not the least of which is that two steps forward and one step back is still at least one step forward. And besides that, as Jill Zimmerman and I noted in the essay we co-wrote on this Torah incident for the new Women's Torah Commentary [speaking of change – a Women's Torah Commentary!] – the new law, even though initially approved of by God – needed some tweaking in order to be fair to everyone. Jews of course learned this a long time ago – and so did the inventors of the United States of America – we learned that laws need to be interpreted and sometimes re-interpreted – Judaism and the United States both depend on interpretation and re-interpretation. And those of us who are benefiting – and we all are -- by the California State Supreme Court's "tweaking" of our understanding of the State Constitution know it first hand these days. Another aside: our next battle, after we defeat Prop 8 – ought to be to overturn California's proposition system altogether – that our State's constitution can be changed by a simple majority vote of the people of California seems in direct contradiction to the purpose of a constitution, doesn't it? Let alone to the legislature and justice system we have in place.

But I digress – but only a little bit – I won't take the time tonight really to look at how much we've changed or stayed the same at BCC over the last 14 years, nor will I reminisce too much right now about all those who are no longer with us – though I can't help but remember how different our summer was 14 years ago – as I arrived just in time for two funerals – Benn Howard and Fred Shuldiner – both past presidents of BCC, both dead because of AIDS. And now this summer – may there be no funerals – and– 18 legal weddings so far – including mine and Tracy's – and 18 more to go that I'm officiating at – 36 weddings or thereabouts in this summer of BCC's 36th year of existence – talk about blessings, talk about change, talk about the coming into being of things we never even knew to dream about 36 years ago, or even 14 years ago.

Dates on the calendar are indeed closer than they appear, but thank goodness for anniversaries and the opportunity to remind ourselves that the dates will come close and zoom by unnoticed unless we give ourselves the opportunity, the gift, of stopping to breath them in – to take them in – these days and all the people who fill them – take them in in all their glory as the gifts from God that they are. May we have many more years together and many more moments where we'll stop to notice how blessed we are to be together.

Let's - together – recite the phrase we recite when we complete – as we do this Shabbat – a book of Torah: Khazak, Khazak v' nitkhazek – be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another. Shabbat shalom & Happy anniversary.

