

**A Bridge to Somewhere:
Inclusion, Outreach and A New Chapter in Our Lives
Parashat Pinchas; July 14, 2017**

**Introductory Sermon to the
Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas**

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Whenever you go somewhere new, when you move or you spend a lot of time somewhere, special features of place and space make themselves known. Maybe it is a quirk, or something newcomers notice that others take for granted. Maybe, instead, it is something that has to be pointed out to you, or you would eternally advertise yourself as being from... somewhere else.

Our family friend Cullen Murphy, onetime editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, once conducted an experiment. He drew a longitudinal line through a map of the Lower 48, the contiguous part of the United States. And then he called every Chamber of Commerce – this was in the era before the Internet, so he actually made the calls. He called every place the line went through and he asked those most responsible for promoting the place: “so, what’s your deal? What is your claim to fame?” Inventor of the zipper, largest recorded French Fry, densest population of black flies at peak season, whatever it was, everyone had something. Gimmicks or groaners or merely local flavor, there was always something.

So in Erie, Pennsylvania, when we moved there in July of 1992, immediately after the Democratic candidate announced his running mate, we were the first to notice the intersection of Clinton and Gore. To everyone else,

they were just street names, taken for granted. It took a new set of eyes to notice the national connection.

In Buffalo, everyone knows to use the definite article when referring to a highway number. Seemed silly to us, and we didn't follow suit, until we tried to say to someone "take 295 to 95" and we realized why the locals said "take THE 295 to THE 95." And in Washington DC, the traffic reports don't even bother announcing that "there is an accident." It's just... assumed. They say, instead: "The accident is..." and they give the location.

So, now, here we are. Good evening, everyone. Or, to stick with the imagery having to do with streets, and roads, and getting around: oy! And, this: all these other observations I made upon moving felt like insights, however minor. But friends, I confess: I just don't know what to make... of the Bridge to Nowhere.

Tonight I want to speak with you about getting by, and getting around. About finding our way past obstacles to get where we want to be. About inclusion, and outreach, and a new chapter in all of our lives. Tonight I want to speak with you about... a bridge to somewhere.

What a remarkable scene we encounter in this week's Torah portion. There, after a deeply disturbing start, a weekly reading which seems to reward violence and encourage extremism, we find a tale of courage and conviction, a triumph for justice and common sense over contemporary conventions and the power assumptions of the time.

It is here, this week, that a group of women, sure of their cause and heedless of the cost, approach Moses to plead their case. Their father, they said, a man named Tzelophchad, died in the Wilderness – not a rebel, not a rabble-rouser, just old. And he had, well, look.... Do you remember the opening of *Fiddler on the Roof*? There's Tevye, looking at us plaintively and explaining "I have five daughters!"

The issue is clear. The people are about to come to the end of a journey. They are focused on the laws of land. And, as was commonplace, property was to be passed from a father to... the oldest son. Even if the oldest son is... the youngest child.

But what if there were no son? With no father, no brothers, their land would pass out of their hands. Everything will go to the nearest male relative, no matter how distant that relationship may be.

So they bring their claim, these women. A novel question, a potential revolution. Why should not women inherit? What is just and right and fair? And Moses answers by saying: "Um, er, ugh, huh, what? I have no idea what to do."

But look... You know the old saying about why we wandered in the wilderness for forty years? Because Moses was too stubborn to ask for directions! At least, here, he did. "I don't know. I'll go ask." Actually, those are pretty spiritual words.

So this time, yes, Moses asks. And you could not get a more direct response. "*Ken b'not Tzelopfchad dovrot...* The cause of the daughters of Tzelophad is just."

So here is this story, towards the end of the book of Bamidbar, as we approach the end of Numbers, which turns convention on its head, charts a new course, finds a new way forward. Barriers fall, a new path revealed, at least one step forward on a long journey to justice.

But then it dawns on us: the book of Numbers has been at this for quite a while.

Leviticus was about restrictions, about who could do what where and when, in a constrained, contained, deeply detailed way. Only priests can step here, only high priests can go there, only on certain days, only in certain ways. You have to dress right, you have to be born right, you have to marry right, you even have to look a certain way.

And then this book. Time and again we see special efforts made to reach out, to include those who were not originally "counted."

There is the plea of the daughters in this portion. There is the census at the beginning of the book – counting only men, until we are forced to rethink these laws. There are ways for bringing those who are separate back into the

community. And, earlier, we hear of those who were ritually impure at the time of the communal Passover offering. “What about us?” they ask Moses. “Isn’t this a ritual for everyone? Isn’t there some way to include us?” After consultation, and with creativity, their needs, too, were met... as a Second Passover offering was made available at a later date, when their ritual status had changed.

The book of Numbers thus teaches us the value, the importance of being counted. And it reminds us, as well, that it sometimes takes an extra effort, a special reach, a carefully crafted invitation... to make sure that everyone really is included.

My friends... the most important thing that I do as a rabbi... the most important thing that we do as a congregation... is to make sure that our coming together in holy assembly is indeed a place... where everyone counts. That the *bimah* of any sanctuary and the classrooms and social space of our buildings are truly the places to which our people will turn... to give voice to the song of the spirit inside their souls.

To fulfill our most sacred task, we must make sure that a synagogue is a place where everyone is counted for who they are... a place for meaning... and a place for creativity, to make sure that the opportunities for meaning... and the message of warmth and welcome flow together.

I want to turn to you for a few moments, if you are able to share, if we know each other well enough yet... to ask about moments, or places, or ways in which any of you have felt left out, left behind, or set aside? [It could be about religious differences, or political ones. It could be something immutable, or about the choices we make. It could be economic, or geographic... being an introvert in a chummy crowd, too loud in a sophisticated circle, being too pushy... or too reserved.

There are so many ways to turn off, and turn away. So many ways to be cold and closed and a clique without ever even meaning to do so. We have spoken with old friends because it is right and natural to do so – and missed making new ones who wanting and waiting and even yearning for a sense of connection.

And I believe... I believe we have to always remember what it is like to be new in a place, and to reach out... as you have done so warmly and graciously with my family... to open hearts and minds and doors to one another.

I remember words I read a decade ago, in which one woman wrote about what her synagogue had come to mean to her.

She had been involved in a congregation for quite a few years... but involved in the way many of us begin, at a social level, at a secular level for programs she found interesting, at a pediatric level -- for the sake of the children. At a gastronomic-level – for the good cookies at the oneg. But then tragedy struck. And her relationship with her synagogue changed.

“My real initiation into the more spiritual aspects of Judaism,” she writes,

“occurred when I lost my 34-year old brother in a car accident in 1989. Until then, everything had seemed to go smoothly for our family. In that startling moment we discovered that randomness in the universe can topple one’s sense of equilibrium. And, out of an increased need for deeper meaning, we turned again to our temple. Temple became a place to ask questions about the nature of God; to think; to wonder; to explore thoughts and feelings that seemed out of place in the everyday world. In our fast paced world, there is little tolerance for grieving, a slow process. We learned about the Yizkor service as a place and time for remembrance. And during Sabbath services and conversations with our clergy, we learned that our Temple was a place that allowed us to be ourselves.”]

We may differ on details, the length of a service, or whether this prayer or another should be sung or read or chanted or skipped. Differ we may on the details. But if our service is a place of warmth... if it is a place of comfort and solace to some, of challenge and prodding to others, if it is a place where the spirit sings and all are welcome, if it is a place that allows us to be ourselves, then the details will matter less in the long run.

To transform our lives, our worship has to matter. To matter, it must reinforce, and act out, the message that *we* matter.

The synagogue can be a place that heals us and asks us to heal the world. If it is a place of meaning and creativity. If it is a place where each one of us... counts.

A story. King David had a harp which always hung on the wall above his bed. Often at midnight, the wind came in the window, and plucked the harp strings, playing a small song.

David always woke up when he heard the wind playing his harp. Then he would take down the harp, and play it himself. David played a great many songs... and he sang his songs to God.

The songs which King David sang were beautiful. Sometimes they were songs of joy, songs that said how glorious the world is and how good it is to be alive. Sometimes his songs offered thanks to God, and praised God for God's justice and goodness. Sometimes, in times of trouble, the songs begged God for help and understanding. But always they were beautiful, because they told of David's deepest and truest feelings.

One night, David sang a wonderful new song, making it up as he went along. When he had finished playing, he quickly wrote it down, and he was so pleased with his new creation that he cried out: "O Lord my God, there is no one in all Your wide world who sings such songs as I do!"

David's call echoed in the still night air. There was not another sound to be heard, except for the low croaking of some frogs who lived in a pond not far from the palace.

Then the sound of croaking became much louder. And suddenly, a huge bullfrog jumped through the window, and right into David's room. The sound of his deep "Croak!" was now so strong that it filled the entire world.

David looked at the frog in amazement, but the frog was not the least bit afraid of the king. "King David," it croaked, "do not think that you are the only fine singer of songs. My family and I have been singing to God since long before you were born." And with that, the frog jumped back out the window, and disappeared as quickly as it had come.

For a while, David sat perfectly still. Finally, he rose, and hung his harp back up on the wall. And he smiled. For King David now realized what he had not known before: that God had planted a beautiful song in every creature in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.