

“I saw the best minds of my generation....”
Tenth Grade Graduation;
Parashat Bamidbar
May 26, 2006

Bamidbar. In the desert. The wilderness. An inchoate, unformed place, where we step into the chaos, the whirlwind, the void. A place without borders and boundaries, without form and function. Primal. Untamed. Absent the institutions and organizations, the expectations and conventions of society and civilization and culture.

Any yet, and yet... In Hebrew we can do something that is more of a leap in English. Repoint the letters, change the vowels, look at the word another way. Do not read “*midbar*” but “*midabber*,” not “desert” but “speaking.” The wilderness, the emptiness, the stillness, the void...it is also a place of speaking. Of vision. Of hearing voices. The vacuum that is full, the sound of silence, the pregnant pause. We step away from it all. And we discover ourselves.

And *Bamidbar*, this week’s portion, always comes right before *Shavuot*. The remembrance of tomorrow, the celebration of revelation. Torah is given in the wilderness. Vulnerable and exposed, in the howling of the winds we begin to hear a voice.

A different time, a different place. As Linda Wertheimer introduced this segment on *Weekend Edition*, “50 years ago a poem was published that changed the literary world, and gave voice to a new generation that

would change American culture.” Fifty years ago an iconic San Francisco bookstore put out a few pages on paper, and we remembered the power of the pen. We discovered again that words can change the world.

We enter into the wilderness. And we do not know where the journey will lead. Apparently Allen Ginsberg set out, at first, to write a very different poem. A much more conventional one. He wrote a dream poem about a woman who had passed away, and he saw her fade away, as, he said, he saw a “rain-stained tombstone read an illegible epitaph under the gnarled branch of a small tree in a wild garden...” He showed it to another poet, who told Ginsberg that it sounded like he was wearing Columbia University Brooks’ Brothers ties, that it was too formal. So, Ginsberg said, he sat down, and just started writing what he thought about. “I didn’t intend it particularly to be a poem. It was just writing. I didn’t think I’d publish it because it was a little dirty. Didn’t want my father to see. But then I had something to read for a poetry reading. So I read it, and people liked it. And then I saw: Oh, this is a poem.”

A poem indeed. A retrospective collection of essays called it “The Poem That Changed America.” According to the NPR report last week, Ginsberg read *Howl* for the first time in public on October 6, 1955 at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. He was 29. In attendance that night was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, owner of City Lights, a bookstore and publishing house in San Francisco. Later that night Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a

telegram, quoting Emerson's greeting to Whitman after first reading *Leaves of Grass*: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

What was so potent, so... revolutionary... about the poem? Reading it... better, hearing it now, still, after all these years, there is power raw and ragged, sharp-edged energy, take-your-breath away integrity in its words. In the words of one critic, the poem gave voice to "an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and alienation in Eisenhower's America. *Howl* became an anthem for the nascent counterculture." It was a foretaste of things to come: the beatnicks, rock and roll, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, women's liberation, gay rights. And drugs and booze and wasted lives and talent shattered in the bleary-eyed haze of self-inflicted amnesia.

The title? It may have been a tribute to Whitman's verse: "what howls are buried in decorum." There was certainly nothing...decorous... about Ginsberg's words. They are outbursts of energy and breathless emotion unleashed, unrestrained, let loose... words as windows into the rantings of the soul.

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
 madness, starving hysterical naked,
 dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
 looking for an angry fix,
 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
 connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
 who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high
 sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness
 of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities
 contemplating jazz,

who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and
 saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
 who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes
 hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
 who were expelled from the academies for crazy &
 publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull,
 who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money
 in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall...

Even now... even now years after I first encountered *Howl* the words simply take my breath away. What was it? What is it still? I come back to two things: intensity. And honesty. A voice cries in the wilderness. And a lesson learned from the Talmud: "*d'varim sheyotzim min halev, nichnasim lalev*. Words that come from the heart... enter into the heart."

This Erev Shabbat we recognize the accomplishments of our Tenth Grade class. These young people, these almost-men and women, are with us for two more years. And then, by and large, they fly away, ready and eager... even if we are not quite ready for them to strike out on their own. The time comes... indeed, the time is here, for them to find their own way. Their own visions. Their own voices.

Later this night they will have words for me, of their own making, about their own Jewish lives. And then this Sunday they come together for the last time as a class, for the ceremony of Confirmation.

I want to share with you, for those who do not know, what the Sunday ceremony consists of. The service is, if you will, a living Midrash, a dialogue with tradition, a conversation between yesterday and tomorrow. Each of these Tenth Graders has written their own reactions

to each of the prayers in the service, and each one of the Ten Commandments. And the service itself is a tapestry of their own theology – not a smooth flow of liturgy at all, perhaps, but each prayer recited, and then reflected upon, with the ideas and reactions of these young people. Sure enough, every year, someone writes, about one of the Ten Commandments: “I agree with this one!” Or even: “I *don’t* agree with this one!”

Come to a service of Confirmation and you will discover, unfolding before your eyes, the found voices and the profound experiences of these students. After hearing one particular student share two or three snippets of her thoughts, you will begin to know her, even if you do not know her.

I do not always agree with the thoughts they have written, and the words that have found their way into Sunday’s service. Indeed, though, that is part of the point. For they are not my words, beyond what I have tweaked for grammar or squeezed to help here or there. Some of their words are deeply personal. Some of them are on the edge of offensive. Some of them are things I had never thought of before. But that service is them. It is a mirror held across eternity, a window onto the future. And our goal is... tentatively, gently, gingerly... to unleash, to tease out, to lift up... the deepest honesty of the soul.

For I know, and you know, where it is that we will truly find ourselves. It is out of the wilderness, out of wandering. With intensity. And integrity. From a place of passion, and power, and purpose.

Sunday is but a step on a journey of the self. Our youth – and, if we are still engaged, we should admit – not just our youth, but all of us – are on an ongoing quest, for something that is raw, and powerful, and “real.” It may be far afield where we find it first, or come from unfamiliar places. It may be shocking, or offensive, or radically different than what we expect. But to find our voice, we must speak from our heart. Hear what we may hear. And then we will see what we will see.

Allen Ginsberg’s journey took him to the heart of Zen Buddhism. One of the first, perhaps, but more have followed, many, many more, JuBus, Jewish Buddhists – funny, you don’t *look* Buddhist! -- searching for something in the esoteric east, mysteries of the spirit they did not know how to find closer by.

But then his mother died. He did not make the funeral. He later learned that there had not been enough male mourners present, so the rabbi had refused to recite the traditional prayer for the dead. Two years later, Ginsberg and a friend, in an altered state that was the least palatable but inextricably intertwined part of his legacy, fumbled through the words themselves. And then Ginsberg sat down and, writing for 40 hours straight, crafted his next masterpiece. It is called “Kaddish.”

Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I
 walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
 downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all
 night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to
 Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph...

Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind,
 Married, dreamed, mortal changed...
 In the world, given, flower maddened, made no Utopia, shut
 Under pine, almed in Earth, balmed in Lone, Jehovah, accept.
 Nameless One Faced, Forever beyond me, beginningless, endless,
 Father in death...

In the world which He has created according to His will Blessed
 Praised
 Magnified Lauded Exalted the Name of the Holy One Blessed
 Is He.
 In the house in Neward, Blessed is He. In the madhouse, Blessed
 Is He. In the house of Death, Blessed is He!...
 Blessed be He who dwells in the shadow! Blessed be He!
 Blessed be He!
 Blessed be you, Naomi in tears! Blessed be you Naomi in fears!
 Blessed Blessed Blessed in sickness!
 Blessed be you Naomi in hospitals! Blessed be you Naomi in
 Solitude! Blest be y our triumph! Blest be your bars! Blest be
 Your last years' of loneliness.
 Blest be your failure! Blest be your stroke! Blest be the close of
 your eye! Blest be the gaunt of your cheek! Blessed be your
 withered thighs!...

To some it was blasphemy. Others saw it as tribute. To me the
 words are there, raw and real. Lingering sacraments of a shattered
 heart.

Allen Ginsberg stepped into the wilderness, where everything is
 undone, where we hear voices and visions, where we uncover and recover
 and discover ourselves. And then, unorthodox, original, honest to the
 end... Allen Ginsburg came home.

Words have power. They can affirm or frighten, comfort or challenge. They can be light or heavy, casual brush-offs, or piercing arrows, puffs of air... or gale force winds.

We hope to build connections, and community, and affirmation in all that we do here, a coming-closer to Judaism, an embrace of the Jewish people. But in the end... it all depends on you. Not guilt but guts. Not outside pressure, but internal confirmation. Not agreement, but authenticity... that is the most sacred work we do together.

Shabbat Shalom.