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Standing at the Abyss

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I wondered what it would feel like 20 years later. Standing in the same place, with the same Torah reading, many of the same teachers, with some so obviously gone. z'l. I remember Bonia and the [music](#), family and friends whose presence were a witness to how important a moment this was for us. I remember how we almost didn't have a service because adding the Imahot to the Avot was such a struggle. I remember the drasha on the blessing that said if one gave the blessing without a pure heart they would turn to a pile of dust. I remember wondering if JELC would survive after we were gone. I remember the blessing, chanting it from the Torah with Dr. Yerushalmi's Sephardic trope, receiving it and wanting to feel transformed by the whole larger than life experience of smicha.

To be honest, though I did long for transformation, I didn't even get close. Twenty years ago, I was overwhelmed with the awesome task before us: to change the world. The weighty burdens we were willing to take on for the great cause of Tikkun left little room for the joy of service or the possibility of real transformation. I was too full of believing that I was responsible for saving the world, making Judaism safe for women, the gay and lesbian community, etc. The list was long. I knew there was much to do but I was only beginning to know how and what. But I'm here to tell you that I do feel the blessing and it's possibilities of transformation today. Twenty years later I thank God everyday for the privilege of serving as a rabbi, for my family, for the amazing congregation I am a part of and I share the blessing of this week's sidra every chance I get. We reach our arms around each other and sometimes we say, "yevarechecha", sometimes "yevareich", and sometimes, "nevarech eyn hachayim," and we dare to believe that this three-part blessing will guard us, protect our children, heal us and bring us peace even when it doesn't come right away.

On this portion, the Sefat Emet asks what does it mean at the end of the blessing when it says, "v'ya seim lecha (lach) shalom"? " And may God give you peace." He answers, Shalom or shleimut, wholeness is the inner point of truth. Within even the smallest bit of light, everything is contained in it. That's why God is called Shalom, for God is the wholeness of all. And when Israel is aware of this wholeness, even a tiny point, a single moment can contain the infinite fullness and joy of godliness. Then, no matter how

sad or broken or lost I am or you are or Israel is or the world is, I never, at least so far, I never lose my faith. I can respond with a spirit of hope and not of despair. The Sefat Emet is telling us that just as the possibility of transformation was right here for me twenty years ago, it is here for you today. Maybe not in the godlut, the great glimpse of the whole picture of a grand transformation experience, but certainly in the katnut, that point of light, that single moment.

Serving a congregation has given me the spiritual program that leads me to be aware of the blessing even in the katnut. What's the program? Weekly immersion in Torah study, hearing and responding to the constant call of the work of tikkun at home and in the streets of my city, and in the joyful celebration of Shabbat. These practices have taken me deeper and deeper into knowing that we are co-creators of the world around us. Just as we must admit that we have made quite a mess of things, there is hope in knowing that we are not victims of the reality of the material world because it does respond and heal from our inner work.

Maybe you know this already. I should have. It was in the pages of the Zohar that we studied with Dr. Lehman every Tuesday night in the Sisterhood dorm that promised us awareness if we would let Torah draw us into her layers of subtlety. It was in the faces of the children at JELC. It was in our relationships with remarkable teachers and with each other. The teachings and the spiritual practices, the possibility of shleimut, were in this place but I didn't always know it.

Years ago Jim and I were on sabbatical in Israel, still looking, I suppose, for that godlut transformation, the glimpse of hakol, the all. We slowed down. Started to practice what we had preached. We studied. We took time with our children. We really celebrated Shabbat with joy and time for laughter. The extended Shabbat of a sabbatical gave us many opportunities to experience the shleimut, to glimpse the whole in the katnut, the small details of ordinary life. For weeks we delighted in simple celebrations of Shabbat. Walking, study, lunch with friends. Experiencing the katnut would have been enough. Finding joy in the smallest point of light. It was simple and complete. But we have this youngest child. Adina was born with serious congenital heart disease and spina bifida and I always want her to experience everything, to never let her sickness get in the way of her having a full life. It's complicated when your child's suffering comes from something that happened when she was in your womb. It's hard work to let go of feeling responsible. A few other families were planning a trip to the Sinai for Shavuot. This was the call of the godlut. Still yearning for that transformation from a glimpse of hakol in the godlut, the greatness, we decided to end our sabbatical with a trip to Sinai.

Everything went wrong the first day. The border crossing into Egypt was

difficult. We were 5 [adults](#) and 11 children and our tour guide hated kids. It was very, very hot, and in just one half a day of five in the desert, we had already finished most of the bottled water we brought to protect us from the dysentery that would be especially dangerous for Adina. We were tired before we even began. Then we found out that our carefully crafted plans had been changed. Instead of climbing Moses' Mountain at sunrise of our last day we would climb on that first afternoon. The climb was hard, especially for Adina. Our guide was sure she wouldn't make it. There would be a place, he said, that we could wait. Half way up she began to have trouble breathing. We hadn't thought about the effect of the altitude on her heart. We took turns carrying her. Six hours later, as the sun was setting, Shabbat beginning, we made it to the top and everyone cheered. Our Kabbalat Shabbat was beautiful on the mountain. Adina fell asleep. We sang, lit candles, Rabbi Dan who carried Adina most of the way also brought up a bottle of wine. We played the drum with Egyptians, sang in every language and shared our kiddush.

It was very dark as we began to walk down the mountain. This time carrying was too dangerous. The path was narrow and the flashlights lit only a small space ahead. We were alone except for the occasional camel providing cold coca colas to the kiosks along the way. Each adult took a small child. I took Adina. As we walked she was tired and dehydrated. I apologized to her.

I thought we were climbing the mountain for her, for the kids. Then I knew it was for me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I thought it was for you but I realize it was for me and maybe not the right thing for you at all." Then from a deep place of forgiveness and understanding in her soul she said, "its ok, mom". She stopped me and said, "look". All I had seen was the little bit of ground and the thick darkness. Then I looked up. We were surrounded by millions of stars, an endless infinite sky full a stars. Not just above, but all around us. I had a glimpse of the whole at that moment. Everything seemed so clear. Nothing was difficult, nothing a burden. I was so grateful for the clarity of that moment. In an instant I knew that I could love completely without fear of loss. I knew everything would be fine and the glimpse of the truth that love for my child meant bringing joy to her life and to be able to hear her suffering, not to have to fix it, but to hear it without being afraid. We stopped at that spot for a long time. I realize now that everyone must have stopped because we never lost the group, everyone having their own moment at Sinai, with the ground pulled out from under us in the place where nothing is sown surrounded by the stars connected to creation. I wondered if what we had glimpsed was part of the godlut, the big picture, and how it would change us. Would that moment of clarity help us to make the right choices, love the right people and take the right next steps toward a lasting peace?

That experience at Sinai was one of the transformational experiences I longed for. When I remember it, it does change me. It reminds me to not be seduced by the familiarity of routine, or material comfort when that would result in a missed opportunity to experience godly clarity and awareness. When I remember Sinai I never work on Shabbat. Oh, I lead the services. I teach Torah. I stand with our b'nai and banot mitzvah students. I call the couples up for an auf ruf, but I don't work. I pray. I sing. I learn. I listen. I immerse myself in the oneness, my wellspring overflows and I am renewed and prepared. When I remember that moment at Sinai I hear the suffering of those around me and I know how to respond and I am no longer overwhelmed by the greatness of the task. And no matter how tragic, how awful the sadness and the suffering might be we find that tiny point of light and make room for joy.

Remembering Sinai has been a blessing for our three children. No matter how busy we are they know they come first even when we are not always there. They are proud of what we do and they are grateful to be a part of our community.

Remembering Sinai has helped me to unlearn so many things that kept me stuck and figure out so many things that have been a blessing to my community. We never let institutional or economic restraints limit our vision. No one says that sounds great but the "reality is". Our reality is created by that vision that can only be limited by the limits of our own creativity. I am committed to serving a lay lead congregation no matter how big we get. Surprisingly, I have learned that the more I work to give away my power and teach to empower others the more influence I have. The more I get out of the way the more of a presence I am. The more of myself I give away the more I have to give. The more time I take to listen, even to those who offer the greatest resistance, the more time and wisdom and energy I have to bring healing and build a community whose purpose is to nourish the soul. When I remember Sinai we transform the material world to reflect the vision and values of the heart and we have learned that the less we act like a [business](#) the more successful we are.

We decided to be a presence in the city. Racism and materialism drove the Jews to the suburbs. Seventeen years ago a small community formed because we needed to see the suffering on the streets of the city from our window. Reality said, "no one will care." But our partnerships with like valued churches in the city, in the schools, building homes, making [health](#) care more accessible, feeding and clothing the poor in our neighborhood have people caring more than we knew we could. At a recent national conference on faith based initiatives an African American leader in our community was talking about violence in Cincinnati and said that our efforts to relieve the injustice and suffering were helping to keep the peace

in the streets of St. Louis.

We decided never to have a building. Reality said, "you'll never grow." We grew so large we had to build a building. We said no plaques, all anonymous, no names, just give with a willing heart. Reality said, "You'll never raise a cent." It's built and it's almost paid for. We decided not to sacrifice values and principles and consciousness for continuity or survival. Reality said, "You are not doing your part." We can't keep up with the demands for Hebrew classes, Torah study and conversion.

I understand that JELC has survived, in no small part because of this class. There was no place for JELC in reality. The city code said you have to have a window. The state didn't even permit infant care. And those were the easy obstacles to overcome. But good hearts determined to put our children first and do the right thing transformed reality and did change the world a little bit.

Remembering this helps me stand before you and thank you for receiving the blessing today to serve as rabbis. I hope the Sefat Emet's teaching of finding shleimut in the katnut will inspire you. The possibility to be transformed is here today, I know it. It is in the love of your family and friends who are here because they know how important this moment is for you. It's in the presence of your teachers, here and of blessed memory. It's in your relationships with each other and in the joy of the celebration of this Shabbat service. I pray that as you go forth and serve your communities the holy task of changing the world will not be a burden but a joy. I pray that your own spiritual paths will continue to deepen your commitment to tikkun. Most of all I pray that the blessing will guard you and those you love, fill you with light and yaseim lach- lecha shalom, give you peace.

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