

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

On a recent trip to Arizona, my wife Amy and I traveled on the 'Road to Nowhere.' It was a project of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the intent was to cut a road up the canyon to a lake and waterfall oasis high in the desert mountains. When the money for its construction ran out, the road ended many miles short of the destination. Now, in order to reach the refreshing waters, one is forced to leave the vehicle behind where the road ends and walk the rest of the way on terrain untouched by human hands or tools.

As we journey in our Torah reading from Passover to Shavuot, we always reach *BeHar Sinai*; Mount Sinai. We've been there already, of course, back in Exodus. Hopefully, our journeys will take us to the mountaintop more than once in our lives. And each time, we'll learn something new. This trip I learned that: "...the land is Mine, you are but strangers resident with Me."(Leviticus 25:23) This proposition that the true owner of God's creation is God places a limit on our notions of private property, ownership and control as Jewish law and tradition constantly remind us.

You might think that your farm and its produce are reserved for your use alone, but the corners of your fields must be available for the hungry and unemployed to harvest and collect. Moreover, every seven years you must leave your entire field alone altogether, letting it rest and heal; reaping only what falls and grows naturally. You might think that all that you have accumulated over a lifetime rightfully belongs to your heirs, but after every generation there is to be a great societal re-distribution and equalization called Jubilee. You might think that, at least while you are alive, you ought control all of your wealth, but the laws of *zedakkah* mandate wealth sharing. You might think that having employees' means that you can make them work at your will, but not on *Shabbes*. You might be more comfortable reserving the community resources for 'your own kind' but we are commanded to love the stranger. You might think that you should be able to make you children look neat and proper, but you must let you sons' hair grow out their first years of life, letting them look *the way God intended for them to look*.

Even in contemporary, market driven America, there are limits to private ownership. A portion of our personal income must go to help fund government programs and to provide relief to the most vulnerable people in society. Even the wealthiest real estate tycoons are prohibited from owning and developing property designated as national forests or parks, set aside for public use and/or conservation. Yet, our spiritual message of 'sharing at the edges' which tends to blur the line between private and public can certainly appear counter-cultural against the current landscape of mega-accumulation and an ever widening gap separating the rich from the poor. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed almost 50 years ago that, "Man has indeed become primarily a tool-making animal, and the world is now a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of his needs."

While many of us may chafe at the thought of limits, the truth is that human will conscience and autonomy are a still a priority under the paradigm envisioned with "The land is Mine"...*to a point*. It is after that point that we are taught to cease trying to impose ourselves through complete ownership and control and let God's vision emerge. If we owned and controlled it all, we would never find out what it was meant to be like.

Amy and I rode a tram until the 'Road to Nowhere' came to an end, thankful that much of this journey had been made so easy. Then we hiked up the beautifully unscarred mountain, jumped into the refreshing pools of water, even more thankful that we were merely residents and that God was the ultimate owner of the land.