

SHEMOT – MATTICE’S BM: ALIYOT, SERMON, MISHEBEIRACH

1. Mattice’s Barmitzvah

SERMON

Mazal Tov Mattice on your beautiful Torah reading, your interpretation of what you read and of course the way in which you led the service this morning. You are very much a child of Kol Chai – you’ve been coming along to services with your parents since you were quite young, so it’s a real pleasure to celebrate this transition to young adulthood with you.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, once said that each of the five books of the Torah represent a different phase of life. Genesis, is all about childhood and growing up in a family. It’s an epic tale of four generations of parents and childrens, brothers and sisters, love and fraternal war. But Exodus, the book that we begin today, with the story of Moses and slavery in Egypt, is all about being a teenager, about taking off, spreading your wings and realising that there is a world outside the family home and that sometimes authority needs to be challenged in order to be able to truly find yourself. Of course you are at the very beginning of your journey today Mattice. Today you are surrounded by your family and it’s a moment to appreciate everything you have had up to this point. But if we are successful as

parents, then at some point our children do leave us. At some point in the next few years, you will take the next step and start working out what freedom means to you and how you will become the adult you are meant to be. And today we also celebrate the beginning of that journey that starts right here.

At the heart of your Torah reading was Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. The thing is though, that bushes are set alight in the desert all the time. Moses would have known this – he was a shepherd after all. The desert is a hot dry place and seeing a bush burning would be of no greater concern than noticing roadworks on your way home. What was different this time was that the bush continued to burn, that it didn't burn out. And how did Moses know that? He could only have known that this bush was different, because he turned to look and he stopped. That's when he realised that the burning bush was something special. Because he had already realised that this was holy ground and so he had stopped what he was doing and turned to look. It's easy to miss miracles. We all lead such busy lives, it's hard to take the time. But if Moses had rushed along after his sheep, he wouldn't have noticed God in the burning bush and he wouldn't have received the mission that made him who he really was – not a desert shepherd, but the leader and liberator of his people.

We often talk about a Bar Mitzvah as if it's an event. Come to my Bar Mitzvah we say. Or perhaps – come to the Bar Mitzvah party! But a Bar Mitzvah is not a service or a party. It's you. You're the Bar Mitzvah, literally child of the commandment by which we mean, someone who is now obligated in their own right to fulfil the responsibilities of a Jew. You become a Bar Mitzvah when you become 13 – everyone does – and you confirm that you are up to your adult responsibilities. But becoming a Bar Mitzvah doesn't really happen overnight. There's a whole process leading up to it, and there'll be a whole process over the next few years, as you decide what this really means to you and how you want to be Jewish.

It's about becoming who you really are. And that's another kind of miracle. This week we discover God's true name when Moses asks God who they are: And the answer is: Ehyeh asher ehyeh – I will be that which I will be. We often think of God as a person or a force, but actually God's not a noun of any kind. God, when asked, is a verb. God is the process of becoming, the potential within us, the ways in which we interact and the ways in which existence changes or stays the same. Ehyeh asher ehyeh. I will be that which I will be.

And we wait to find out what you will be at this moment when you begin to become that which you will be. In your Dvar Torah, you talked about people throughout history who have, like Moses been asked to free their people and who have stepped up to the task. Of

course the story of the Exodus has inspired people like the civil rights activist Martin Luther King, whose birthday was tomorrow, January 15th which will be marked on Monday in the United States. He was also a preacher and often quoted the Exodus story, seeing himself in the role of Moses. In 1968 in Memphis he said: “Whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity”.

The very first acts of civil disobedience take place in the Book of Exodus right at the beginning of Moses’ life. Two midwives, Shifra and Puah are told to kill all the newborn baby boys. They refuse and tell Pharaoh that the Israelite women give birth too fast for them to get there. Pharaoh then commands everyone to drown the newborn babies in the Nile – all around the time Moses is born. So his mother Yocheved and his sister Miriam conspire with Pharaoh’s own daughter – perhaps the very first women’s movement. And the child they saved not only became the leader of the exodus but also a whole new community because it’s not until the exodus from Egypt that the Israelites really became a people.

Every parsha, every Torah reading has a special message for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah who reads from it. This will always be your Bar Mitzvah portion Mattice. There is something there about becoming the person you really are, and perhaps something about making

change and being part of a new generation that will form new and different kinds of communities to provide us all with the leadership we'll need for the future. And hang on to those parallels between Star Wars and the Exodus because you're absolutely right that both are epic moral battles in which, in the end, light must prevail. When Moses said that God was Ehyeh asher ehyeh, I will be that which I will be, he was announcing a completely new way of understanding God, a new way of understanding the world and an imperative to change the world to embody this new vision. The Israelites had to be free to leave their forced labour, and to explore how they could create a new kind of society that would fulfil their vision. Mattice I hope that you will always feel free to explore your own visions and to play your part in changing our world for the better.

And now I invite Mattice and his family to join me on the bimah....

MISHEBEIRACH

Mattice – may you always have the courage to stand up for those who are discriminated against or in trouble. May you always remember who your people are – your family, your friends and your community. May you take the time to notice the miracles that are all around you, and when you understand what life is demanding of you, may you always say yes. May you become the person you are meant to be, and may you not try to be like Moses, but be the best version of Mattice that you can be. May your compassion for the

vulnerable and the elderly continue even when life gets busy and the demands of work are great. May you continue to engage in Jewish community. And may the force always be with you! And let us say...Amen!

Mazal Tov etc.