**REFLECTIONS ON 50 YEARS IN THE RABBINATE**

**A LETTER TO MY SONS, GRANDCHILDREN AND DAUGHTER IN LAW**

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I feel very honored to have invited to deliver the *Dvar Torah* this evening. There is something very exciting but also very terrifying about reflecting on one’s rabbinate among so many of you who are my friends and classmates but, most importantly, my mentors and teachers. Where do we get our best material? Where do we get the *chomer ledrush* that is most important? Well, if you have a long-time spouse or a long-time partner, you know it’s they who often provide you with the best material. So, when I told my wife Elaine of 53 years that I was invited to give the *Dvar Torah* tonight, she reminded of a story she forwarded to me 11 years ago. It is a story which fits into the category of ‘everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten.’

Did you hear about the teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put on his boots?

He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots didn't want to go on. When the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, "Teacher, they're on the wrong feet." She looked and sure enough, they were.

It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. Then he announced, "They aren't my boots."

She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, "Why didn't you say so?" which she would have liked to.

Once again, she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off. He then said, "They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them."

She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace and the courage she had left to wrestle the boots on his feet again. And now she said, "Where are your mittens?"

He said, "I stuffed them into the toes of my boots."

Sometimes, being a rabbi feels like that teacher. But I would not want to have done anything else.

When each of my six grandchildren were born, I wrote each of them a letter and shared it with my congregation as one of my High Holiday sermons. Tonight, with your indulgence I will address my remarks to my grandchildren and to my sons and daughter-in-law.

Dear Seth, Jeremy, Alyssa, Leah, Alana, Heather, Stephen, Lily, and Oliver:

As I celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination I want to share with you seven texts that have shaped my life and continue to shape my life. Originally, I had planned on ten texts but your mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, and my wife said, “Keep it short.”

My story and your stories are part of the history of the Jewish people. Each of us has a sacred story—our own *aggadah*. Our sacred texts frame the way I think about my life. These texts influence my thinking and my values and they place the incidents of my life into a Jewish context. I learned from my classmate Larry Kushner that all theology is personal and that only when the stories of Torah become our personal stories does the text come alive. I hope that you will come to see your stories as your personal *aggadah*.

1. *Lech lecha*, go forth.

 וַיֹּ֤אמֶר יְהוָֹה֙ אֶל־אַבְרָ֔ם לֶךְ־לְךָ֛ מֵֽאַרְצְךָ֥ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ וּמִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךָּ

“And God said to Avram, ‘Leave your land and your birth place and your father’s house and go to than I will show you.’” (Gen. 12:1)

It was my father’s *lech lecha* moment which made my life possible. He decided to leave Germany in 1932—his land, the place of his birth, his father’s house—when he lost his job because of rising anti-Semitism. His parents thought Hitler was only a passing phenomenon. When I asked my father what made him so perspicacious, he said he heard Horace Greeley saying “Go West Young Man Go West.” My father, like Avram, travelled to a new and unknown place. He was fortunate to be able to emigrate. I often think of those who could not emigrate because the borders of United States were closed. His decision to leave Germany has put me under obligation to continue his journey and the journey of the Jewish people. Coming from a refugee and survivor family, I believe the United States must always be haven for the huddled masses yearning to be free. Now more than ever we must protect the light of Lady Liberty’s torch. Today the phrase “Never Again” must be a rallying cry for us and for all people.

2. Everyone can see the burning bush or if you pay attention a little thing can change your life.

א וּמֹשֶׁ֗ה הָיָ֥ה רֹעֶ֛ה אֶת־צֹ֛אן יִתְר֥וֹ חֹֽתְנ֖וֹ כֹּהֵ֣ן מִדְיָ֑ן וַיִּנְהַ֤ג אֶת־הַצֹּאן֙ אַחַ֣ר הַמִּדְבָּ֔ר וַיָּבֹ֛א אֶל־הַ֥ר הָֽאֱלֹהִ֖ים חֹרֵֽבָה: ב וַ֠יֵּרָ֠א מַלְאַ֨ךְ יְיָ֥ אֵלָ֛יו בְּלַבַּת־אֵ֖שׁ מִתּ֣וֹךְ הַסְּנֶ֑ה וַיַּ֗רְא וְהִנֵּ֤ה הַסְּנֶה֙ בֹּעֵ֣ר בָּאֵ֔שׁ וְהַסְּנֶ֖ה אֵינֶ֥נּוּ אֻכָּֽל: ג וַיֹּ֣אמֶר מֹשֶׁ֔ה אָסֻֽרָה־נָּ֣א וְאֶרְאֶ֔ה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶ֥ה הַגָּדֹ֖ל הַזֶּ֑ה מַדּ֖וּעַ לֹֽא־יִבְעַ֥ר הַסְּנֶֽה: ד וַיַּ֥רְא יְיָ֖ כִּ֣י סָ֣ר לִרְא֑וֹת וַיִּקְרָא֩ אֵלָ֨יו אֱלֹהִ֜ים מִתּ֣וֹךְ הַסְּנֶ֗ה וַיֹּ֛אמֶר מֹשֶׁ֥ה מֹשֶׁ֖ה וַיֹּ֥אמֶר הִנֵּֽנִי:

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He answered, “Here I am.” (Ex.3:1-4)

When I was a pre-med student, I took a comparative anatomy course and on the final there was a question, “How many metatarsal bones are there in the foot of a frog?” I knew at that moment I did not care. I knew that I didn’t want to be a doctor. My life was now of up for grabs. Sitting on an airplane on my way home for winter break a question appeared. “What are you going to do with your life?” The next question which appeared was “Why did you want to be a doctor?” The answer that appeared was “Because I want to help people.” The next question which appeared was “What is the right vehicle?” The answer that appeared was “Judaism.” The direction of my life has been clear from that day to this. All we need to do is say “*Hineni,* Here I am.” Each of us potentially has a burning bush moment if we simply pay attention. A frog’s metatarsal bone changed my life,

3. The most important verse in the Torah

ז וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים ׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם

God created humankind in God’s image. In the image of God God created humankind. God created them male and female (Gen1:27)

This is the starting point of ethics. Each of us is precious, unique and worth a world. The struggle is to see the divine in everyone. Every day I try to look into each person’s face and remember what I am seeing is God’s image. Sometimes it is hard, but I keep trying.

4. We were slaves in Egypt.

This week’s Torah portion, *Vaeira,* recounts our struggle for freedom. Fighting oppression and prejudice is no easy task. Remember it took God and Moses ten tries to free us from Pharaoh. The Torah constantly commands us to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and therefore we are obligated to fight for those who are weak, vulnerable or oppressed.

וְאָֽהַבְתָּ֥ לְרֵֽעֲךָ֖ כָּמ֑וֹךָ אֲנִ֖י יְיָֽ:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev 19:18)

וְאָֽהַבְתָּ֥ לוֹ֙ כָּמ֔וֹךָ כִּֽי־גֵרִ֥ים הֱיִיתֶ֖ם בְּאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם

“You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt “
(Lev 19:34).

We are all in it together and we depend on one another. The fate of our own people and the fate of other peoples are intertwined. We are not safe unless all are safe. We must fight racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia.

5. Speak up for justice and speak truth to power.

When God tells Abraham that he is going to check out Sodom and Gomorrah and see if they are is really as wicked as he heard and if so he will destroy them, Abraham challenges God and says

כה חָלִ֨לָה לְּךָ֜ מֵֽעֲשׂ֣ת ׀ כַּדָּבָ֣ר הַזֶּ֗ה לְהָמִ֤ית צַדִּיק֙ עִם־רָשָׁ֔ע וְהָיָ֥ה כַצַּדִּ֖יק כָּֽרָשָׁ֑ע חָלִ֣לָה לָּ֔ךְ הֲשֹׁפֵט֙ כָּל־הָאָ֔רֶץ לֹ֥א יַֽעֲשֶׂ֖ה מִשְׁפָּֽט

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen 18:25)

We cannot be silent in the face of injustice or evil. As the *Gates of Repentance* reminds us, “Silence is the sin of all good people.”

6. Argue vigorously for what you believe but be open to the ideas of others

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן והלכה כבית הלל

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן מפני שנוחין ועלובין היו ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן

The Gemara asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the *halakha* established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the *halakha* they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai. (Eruvin 13b)

The house of Hillel and House of Shammai in spite of their differences in interpreting the laws of marriage continued to marry each other. Today we have become so polarized that liberals and conservative are even refusing to date one another. The Talmud teaches that even God is open to changing his mind. When Moses teaches God that a law is unjust. God declares Moses, “You are right and I will change the Torah.” Our encounters with others can create new understandings which in turn can cause us to give up long held positions because the new ones now make more sense. Our disputes must be for the sake of Heaven and conducted respectfully.

7. If Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau can do it why can’t we do it

יִּקְבְּר֨וּ אֹת֜וֹ יִצְחָ֤ק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל֙ בָּנָ֔יו אֶל־מְעָרַ֖ת הַמַּכְפֵּלָ֑ה

After Abraham dies Isaac and Ishmael bury their father in the cave of Machpelah.
(Gen 25:9)

I long for the day when the Cave of Machpelah will be a symbol of reconciliation and not conflict.

וַיָּ֨רָץ עֵשָׂ֤ו לִקְרָאתוֹ֙ וַֽיְחַבְּקֵ֔הוּ וַיִּפֹּ֥ל עַל־צַוָּארָ֖ו [צַוָּארָ֖יו] וַיִּשָּׁקֵ֑הוּ וַיִּבְכּֽוּ

After wrestling with the angel Jacob goes to meet his brother Esau. Esau arrives on horseback with three hundred men when he sees Jacob, Esau jumps off his horse and Esau ran to him, embraced him, fell upon his neck and kissed him and they both weep. (Gen 33:4)

In Jewish tradition Ishmael is understood to be father of the Arabs and the Muslims and Esau is a figure for the Christian church. The reconciliation of each pair of estranged brothers gives me hope. Therefore, I continue to devote myself to peace between the Israelis and Palestinians as well as peace between the Israelis and the Arabs and Muslim world. I am constantly involved in dialogues with Christians of all stripes as well as Muslims because through dialogue we can find perhaps understanding, then perhaps reconciliation, then perhaps peace and then perhaps friendship.

There are so many other texts which I would love to share but I believe I have written enough for now. My proudest and most important moments in the rabbinate have not been those for which I have received public accolades. They are the times when I was really present for people in their times of need, joy or sadness. I remember one Shabbat eve I received a call while we were having Shabbat dinner. A congregant’s wife was dying and he asked if I please come to their house. I went to the house and in the living room was a hospital bed and the dying woman’s husband sat on one side of the bed and I sat on the other. Each of us held her hand. After sitting silently for awhile I offered a prayer that her death might be peaceful and then, with my hands on her head, I recited the Priestly Benediction. As I finished the blessing the sun set, Shabbat began, and she took her last breath. I remained a little while, hugged her husband and headed to the synagogue to conduct services. That moment has stayed with me all these years. I recall many such moments. I learned that the most important things were often not what I did or said but that I was simply present.

Finally I have been blessed to have had a real partner and lover for 53 years. She has stood by me in thick and thin. She has been my cheerleader and my most severe critic. I could not have done it without her. I pray that each you will be blessed with a partner like my Elaine.

I love you all. You make each day a blessing and I thank you for always being there for me.

Love

Poppa Peter

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Three times in my rabbinic career I have had the privilege of presenting honorary CCAR memberships to those celebrating the 50th anniversary of their ordination. I consider it the greatest honor of my rabbinate. Tonight, I want to salute my classmates their spouses, partners and widow,s and wish you *mazal tov* and express my deep gratitude to all of you who have played such an important role in my life and the life of the Jewish people. I also want to thank all of the rabbis, spouses, partners, widows and widowers who are here tonight. Individually and collectively you are the living Torah and each of your lives is Talmud Torah. I thank all of you for what you have taught me, the members of your communities, and how in large and small ways you have made the world a better place. In honor of all Torah you represent let me conclude with the follow words from the Kaddish De Rabbanan

עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל רַבָּנָן, וְעַל תַּלְמִידֵיהוֹן וְעַל כָּל תַּלְמִידֵי תַלְמִידֵיהוֹן, וְעַל כָּל מָאן דְּעָסְקִין בְּאוֹרַיְתָא, דִּי בְאַתְרָא הָדֵין וְדִי בְכָל אֲתַר וַאֲתַר. יְהֵא לְהוֹן וּלְכוֹן שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא, חִנָּא וְחִסְדָּא וְרַחֲמִין, וְחַיִּין אֲרִיכִין, וּמְזוֹנֵי רְוִיחֵי, וּפֻרְקָנָא, מִן קֳדָם אֲבוּהוֹן דִּי בִשְׁמַיָּא וְאַרְעָא, וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.

Upon Israel, and upon our sages, and upon their disciples, and upon all the disciples of their disciples, and upon all those who occupy themselves with the Torah, here or in any other place, upon them and upon you, may there be abundant peace, grace, kindness, compassion, long life, ample sustenance and deliverance, from their Father in heaven; and let us say, Amen.