

7 Serendipity and Pedagogy: Presenting the Weekly *Parashah* Through Rabbinic Eyes

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Introduction

On December 19, 2007, an article about Walter H.G. Lewin, a professor (now emeritus) of physics at MIT, appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. Professor Lewin, then 71, was described as a distinguished looking, careful pedagogue who spends 25 hours preparing each of his lectures, choreographing every detail. He is a popular lecturer; for a time, his lectures, which appear on the internet at iTunes U, were the most downloaded in the world. To understand why, and to appreciate why he was the subject of the *Times*' attention, all one must do is to take a look at the picture that the *Times* chose to highlight its article. There, on the front page of the paper, is a picture of Professor Lewin hoisted on a 30-pound steel ball, attached to a pendulum, "swinging across the stage, holding himself nearly horizontal as his hair blows in the breeze he created."¹

Professor Lewin's flair for the dramatic, his devotion to capturing his students' attention—and holding tightly onto it—resonates personally with me. I used to teach chemistry at a college preparatory school in Boston. During my tenure, I was very much aware of the need to engage

¹ See <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/19/education/19physics.html> for the web version of the article. The picture of Professor Lewin as a human pendulum to which I refer above, which I believe captures the essence of his appeal, is not as prominent on this webpage as it was in print. In the print edition of the newspaper, it appeared on page 1; here, it appears mid-way through the article on the left side, above the rather flat caption, "Professor Lewin demonstrates physics of pendulums." (The picture that is most prominent on the webpage appeared on p. A21 of the printed edition.)

my students. I took pains to attract their attention and to engage their minds and, ultimately, their hearts. The way I saw it, a typical high school student is willing to give a teacher about a minute—maybe less—before he or she tunes out. During that brief window, the teacher must make a convincing case that the student should pay attention. And that case is often made most effectively through some sort of visual demonstration, a demonstration that has a playful quality to it—yet which is deeper than it may appear.

And so, as a former high school science teacher, I could relate to the antics I saw in Dr. Lewin's lectures. But antics in the classroom are not just a form of entertainment: they create moments of engagement with the subject matter of the course, moments which allow learning to take place. Professor Lewin understands that when the cultural gap between learner and subject matter is huge, unless the learning environment is creative and fun it can be hard for learning to take place. In an area of inquiry that seems distant and unapproachable, if a teacher can "let go," he or she can help his or her students open themselves up for truly insightful learning to take place.

Though I no longer teach science, I follow similar principles every week as I try to teach rabbinic perspectives on the themes of the *parashah* of the week (the weekly Torah portion) in the context of a Shabbat morning service in my synagogue.

There are many pedagogic challenges in teaching this material in the synagogue on a Shabbat morning. One of them is the very limited amount of available time: I barely have a half hour—and that only on days when the service moves along at a brisk pace. I never know precisely whom I will be facing in my "classroom." There may be "regulars"—men and women who come virtually every week, and who have been coming for years. Some of these may remember what I said in a *d'var torah* (a "word of Torah," a lesson illuminating a Jewish text, usually based on the weekly Torah portion, used here interchangeably with *derashah*) ten or fifteen years ago. There may also be visitors, such as out-of-town guests who are at the synagogue to attend a bar or bat mitzvah celebration, who have never come before and may never come again. I may have 50 to 60 seventh graders, sitting in a group by themselves, and looking very wary, or very oblivious. Incidentally, knowing that adolescents and pre-adolescents may be present somewhat restricts my choice of subject

matter and manner of presentation: certain topics are best avoided, or approached only very delicately.

There is no such thing as an “average student”; even if there were, I wouldn’t be able to assume that he or she knows anything about rabbinic culture. Some of my “students” are Jewish; others, Gentile. I have to think long and hard about whether to use the word, “we,” as in the phrase, “we Jews,” and if so, how and when. Some students are very literate, articulate, and intellectual. Others don’t read much, and may have a simple view of life. Some come to synagogue thinking that they will be interested in hearing what I have to say. Many others are like the teenagers I used to face in my chemistry classes: they’re willing to give me a minute or so before they tune out, or fall asleep.² It is my duty as the *darshan* (preacher or teacher) to try to reach all of them.

Underlying all of these challenges—many of which are very similar to those I faced as a science teacher—is my responsibility as a *darshan* to present material from and about a foreign culture. Rabbinic Judaism—and the rabbinic way of reading the biblical text, of gleaning moral insights from it, and of organizing one’s life around it—is as exotic to many of the Jews who attend services in my synagogue as it is to most Gentiles. The notion that Jewish learning, and specifically the study of rabbinic texts, is at all interesting, insightful, or deserving of being central to one’s Jewish identity is foreign to many—especially to visitors, but also to congregants who don’t generally come to services, and even some who do. And yet I see it as my mission to suggest just that, each and every Shabbat.

Thus, a significant pedagogic challenge is simply to get people’s attention—and to hold it long enough for them to absorb that broad underlying message. I see my challenge, much like the challenge of the science teacher in a world in which many bright people imagine that they could not possibly fully understand science, as making rabbinic

² Actually, although students occasionally closed their eyes during the chemistry classes I taught several decades ago, I don’t recall them falling fully asleep, whereas in synagogue this is not uncommon. Even during scintillating discussions, men and women can fall fast asleep. Until one gets used to it, it can be distracting, if not unnerving.

culture real and relevant, getting it to speak intelligibly to people who might otherwise not consider rabbinic notions at all relevant to the way they lead or think about their lives.

The great modern Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, at the opening address of the Lehrhaus in Berlin, Germany in 1920, described the contemporary challenge of bridging the gap between Torah and life as follows: when Jews were living in pre-modern Jewish communities, they were at home in the world of Torah. The role of the *darshan* was to help them understand the contemporary world. Since the Enlightenment, Jews have become at home in the contemporary world, and it is the responsibility of the *darshan* to help them understand the world of Torah.³ I agree with Rosenzweig, but I think we *darshanim* have more in common with our forebears than his words might suggest. For in either case, we *darshanim* are explicators, we are translators, we are seeking to bridge a gap in understanding, and to reveal connections between Torah and life that would otherwise be hidden.

Before determining how to present their material or message, all *darshanim* face a prior challenge: to determine what to talk *about*. How does one make that choice? How do *I* make that choice? There are many themes on which I could speak on a given Shabbat. How do I determine what to focus my attention and that of my congregation on? When and how do I make that decision? Do I ever second-guess myself? How do I know that I've made the "right" decision? My exploration of these questions is what guides this essay.

First, a few general observations: while this might seem obvious, I always seek a topic that resonates within me. That is, I seek a theme, an idea or a concept—suggested by the *parashah* and/or the occasion—that interests or excites me, and possibly even moves me. My reasoning is that if *I* get a buzz from thinking about it, I can make it interesting to others. If I don't, I'm unlikely to succeed.

How do I "make" that happen? It's not really possible for me to control the process. I can set aside time and provide opportunities for inspiration, but I can never know when that magic moment of connection will take place, or what particular result it will produce. I gain solace from

³ Franz Rosenzweig, "Upon Opening the Judisches Lehrhaus," in *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 98-99

another statement by Rosenzweig, who, in discussing the challenge of adult Jewish education in Weimar Germany, said, “The highest things cannot be planned; for them, readiness is everything. Readiness is the one thing we can offer to the Jewish individual within us, the individual we aim at.”⁴ I try to be ready—to be inspired, and to be motivated to share that inspiration with others. How do I get ready? I open my eyes; I read; I reflect. I constantly try to think about what is going on in my community, in our country, in the world. I consider who is going to be in shul on a particular day. When an idea occurs to me, when a text says to me, “*Darsheini!*”—“Explicate me, preach about me!”—I jot down a few notes, and include enough detail so that I can make sense—and use—of them later.

How much in advance do I do this? A friend of mine who is a Methodist minister sketches out her sermons six to nine months in advance. On the one hand, I envy her; on the other, I don’t believe that I could ever do that. I find it hard to become inspired so far in advance. Even when it comes to High Holiday sermons, for which I begin collecting material and ideas soon after the previous Simchat Torah, I don’t begin writing my drafts until about six weeks before the holidays.

Sometimes an idea occurs to me that I know will be useful months ahead. I may jot down in my calendar that I want to speak about it on a particular Shabbat, but I rarely sketch out more than a few paragraphs. Years ago, there were occasions when, weeks ahead of time, I decided that I was going to speak about such-and-such on a given Shabbat, only to discover as the time approached that the subject seemed less compelling. Now I generally wait until the week of the *derashah* to formulate precisely what I’m going to say. If an idea hasn’t yet occurred to me, I await its occurrence during that week. It generally appears in one moment or in a series of moments of serendipity, when it seems as though everything falls into place. There is a flash of insight, and I know, sometimes vaguely but usually quite specifically, what I’m going to talk about and how I am going to present it.

In this chapter, I focus on that serendipity. How does it happen? How do I know if I’m not there yet, and how do I know when I *am* there?

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, “Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning,” in *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 65.

What are the elements that make it work? What has to be present? To illustrate the process, I will focus on the development of two *derashot* for *Parashat Sh'mot* (the first reading in the book of Exodus, Exod. 1:1-6:1). Both were delivered, coincidentally, in the same calendar year. The first was delivered on January 12, 2007; the second on December 29, 2007. I will review edited diary notes that I took (deliberately collecting data for this study), recording the process of discovering what I was going to discuss and how I was going to present my material, and compare and reflect on those two experiences.

**“Barefoot in the Sanctuary”:
Preparing a Torah Discussion for *Parashat Sh'mot*
(January 13, 2007)**

Tuesday, January 9, 2007.

Yes. The eureka moment has hit. It's 7:38 am on Tuesday. I've got to be at the shul for a meeting in 7 minutes. But there it is: an essay entitled, “Shoeless in the Sanctuary” in my email in-box. The obvious allusion is to the passage in this coming week's Torah portion in which God speaks to Moses at the site of the burning bush and says, “Remove your shoes, for the ground on which you stand is holy” (Exod. 3:5). I subscribe to about three or four different *d'var torah* email distribution lists. Each week, several essays, articles, or *divrei torah* come across my desk and trigger (or fail to trigger) an interest in a particular topic to talk about on the upcoming Shabbat. Ordinarily, I start thinking about the next Shabbat's *d'var torah* on Monday morning, at the latest. But yesterday, I didn't go to morning minyan at 6:45 a.m., so I didn't get to hear the first few verses of the upcoming week's *parashah*, and therefore didn't get to begin to reflect on what to speak about.

Why does this odd topic (the *absence* of shoes in the sanctuary—i.e., the ancient Temple in Jerusalem—and the *presence* of shoes in the synagogue) grip me? I have no idea. Actually, if pressed to answer the question, I do. I'm energized by the idea of looking through rabbinic eyes at something we ordinarily take for granted, in this case shoes. I want people to think about the role of shoes in our own society—and

what they represent. I want them to reflect on the fact that, although Moses was told to *remove* his shoes while standing on holy ground, we ourselves *wear* shoes—generally very nice ones—in shul. I want to help people see the true oddness of Moses removing his shoes, to get them to explore that moment. I want people to see that Rabbinic Judaism is not the same as Biblical Israel. I'm intrigued by the idea of showing how an obvious, often overlooked, feature of daily life may in fact be of significance, may in fact reflect something important about our culture, and how it differs from other cultures, such as rabbinic culture. This topic clearly presents many opportunities for engagement.

Plus, this coming Shabbat is a Shabbat on which we don't have a bar or bat mitzvah, so there's not the same need (within me) to make a strong moral or ethical point. I can have a bit more fun than usual. Instead of talking about "serious" topics, I can talk about shoes in the synagogue—a topic that no one expects to be addressed in shul. This coming Shabbat, because it's a three-day ski weekend here in New England, we'll probably have at most about 80 people in shul. We'll be meeting in our small chapel rather than in the larger sanctuary. It's a more intimate, less formal space—much more conducive to a cozy discussion.

On the other hand, it's Martin Luther King, Jr., Day weekend. How will we acknowledge that? Should the powerful messages of King's life—the need to overcome discrimination, the need to fight for what one believes in, even at the risk of one's own life, the need for our society to be fully inclusive—moral messages rooted in the book of Exodus, from which we are about to begin reading, be somehow contained within this *d'var torah*? They probably can't be. Delivering a *d'var torah* or leading a discussion (on wearing shoes or taking them off) that will ignore those issues, is, at the very least, an issue for me. I take Martin Luther King, Jr., Day very seriously. In previous years, I've given sermons on King's life.⁵ Several years ago, I researched and gave a sermon on his relationship with Abraham Joshua Heschel. Last year (2006), I researched Alice Walker's work and spoke about it.⁶ Generally, I feel irresistibly drawn

⁵ See, e.g., <http://www.templealiyah.com/uploadedFiles/site/About/Leadership/Rabbi/MLK%202004.pdf> .

⁶ See <http://www.templealiyah.com/uploadedFiles/site/About/Leadership/Rabbi/MLK%202006.pdf> .

to acknowledge this day in my *d'var torah*. Can (should, will) I resist the urge, the need, to do that this coming week? We shall see.

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

Last night at 10:00 p.m., before leaving my office, I pulled out my *Sh'mot* file from my file cabinet. I had vaguely recalled thinking about, reading about, and possibly even speaking about, this odd topic a while ago—perhaps many years ago. I took a quick scan, and, lo and behold, I found a study sheet on this precise topic that I had used in 2002! I quickly put it away without reading it. I did, though, get a glimpse of the acknowledgement at the top of the page. It made reference to an article I had read at the time to prepare for the *d'var torah*. The article was written by a different author from the one who'd written the article I'd just received. Good, I thought. I will learn something new. Let me see what the new article has to teach me, before looking more closely at what I had written five years ago.

A few hours later, before going to bed, I started reading the 2007 article on shoelessness. I was disappointed. As I read it, I became bored. Oy, I thought. This is not working. It's not sounding interesting—how will my own *derashah* be interesting? On the other hand, I thought, it's 12:40 a.m. Maybe it's just that it's too late to get excited about a topic. Let me take another look at it tomorrow.

Thursday, January 11, 2007

I just received a nice midrashic spark (in an Oz Ve-Shalom *d'var torah* that came in the mail today) that reminded me that this topic (shoelessness) can indeed be interesting (which therefore encouraged me not to lose heart):

Taking off one's shoes expresses giving oneself up entirely to the meaning of a place, to let your personality get its standing and take up its position entirely and directly on it without any intermediary. So the priests in the Temple had always to function barefooted, and nothing was allowed to be *hotzetz*, to intervene between their feet and the ground, or between their hands and the holy vessels during the service, or between the priestly garments and their body. Nothing in the Temple was mere gaudy show, man-designed to impress and have effect on the eye of the

beholder. Everything was to work back on the personality of the ministrant, and if one wished to act in the service of the Temple one had to identify oneself directly with it, and become sanctified by it, and be a part of it. “The floor sanctifies” (Zevahim 24a)—the holy soil sanctifies the priest.

(Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, Exod. 3:5, Levi translation)

Now *this* is the kind of writing that turns me on. This clarified for me what I’d like to explore on Shabbat: *How does clothing contribute to or take away from our ability to experience the holy?* Why is it that in our society, everyone wears fancy clothes on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Why is it that the characters in *Sex in the City*—particularly its star, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, were depicted as focusing so much attention, and spending so much money, on shoes? What is it about shoes that they can so delight women—and, apparently, intrigue men? (Are women’s attitudes toward shoes different from those of men? How?) Why is it that no adult in a liberal congregation would ever think of taking off their shoes on the *bimah*, yet they’ll often wear otherwise revealing clothing in public without a second thought?

Friday, January 12, 2007

Oy. It’s already Friday morning, I’ve had one pastoral encounter in my office and I’m heading off to see two other congregants in their homes, and I still haven’t found an hour to clarify precisely what I’m going to say on Shabbat, and how I’m going to say it.

But just this morning, the following email (edited slightly for readability) from a colleague came across my desk:

Subject: Shvartze

I’m sure that subject line got your attention. I’m working on a sermon about how decades after the civil rights movement (in which Jews were active) many Jews are still racially intolerant. I hear congregants use the Yiddish derogatory term “shvartze” all the time in various contexts, in referring to their cleaning lady, their team’s quarterback, or my assistant (!). Was MLK a shvartze? Barack Obama? Bill Cosby? Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods?

How would we feel if Gentiles used “kike” the way some Jews use “shvartze”?

Serendipity and Pedagogy

Is shvartze as bad as the “N-word”?

Do those who use shvartze have the right to be outraged at Michael Richard’s racial tirade? Or former Sen. George Allen’s Macaca comment?

I plan to talk about King, Heschel, the recent PBS special about antisemitism (which was very well done), and the slavery of our people in Sh’mot.

Any texts you can think of on racial slurs or prejudices?

I’ve also been thinking about what MLK’s feelings would be on the Black community’s use (ownership?) of the N-word today.

Now *that’s* a topic to speak about! It’s enough to make me feel inadequate, or ashamed. It’s relevant, timely, and important. Do I go with my original (and, in comparison, seemingly frivolous) topic—or do I switch gears, and try to lead a discussion on racism, exclusion, slavery, the Exodus from Egypt, etc?

I have to go. I’ll have to decide later this afternoon.

Friday, January 12, 2007

1:30 p.m. I’m back in the office, several hours after I’d hoped to be. Three things have just happened, which have convinced me to deliver the *d’var torah* on shoelessness as I’d hoped.

First, I was grabbing a quick bite at home before returning to the shul to write up my *d’var torah* when my teenage daughter came in. “What are you talking about tomorrow?” she asked. I told her that I was thinking about speaking about Moses removing his shoes when God spoke to him at the burning bush, but that I was also tempted to say something about the connection between MLK’s life and work and the Exodus story.

“Didn’t you speak about that once before?” she asked, referring to shoelessness. “I remember you speaking about how, in a holy place, you should dress the way you would if you were approaching to meet royalty. If the practice is to remove your shoes, you remove your shoes, and if the practice is to keep your shoes on, you keep your shoes on.”

That was the first thing that happened. And it was fairly important. I realized, through hearing my daughter’s recollection of that earlier

discussion five years ago, just how interesting that topic really is to talk about. (Incidentally, although I was initially dismayed by how well she remembered my *derashah* from five years ago, I also realized that her memory is exceptional. Moreover, because of the holiday weekend, most likely no one else who had been present at the earlier discussion would be in shul the next day.)

Then, just a moment ago, I heard a story on the news about the practice of removing shoes as part of the security check before getting on an airplane.⁷ I suddenly realized that there was an additional element in this topic, one that hadn't been present in January 2002. That was still several months before the famous shoe bomber's attempt to blow up a trans-Atlantic plane had resulted in all of us removing our shoes before getting on planes. If any of us had been told back in 2000 that, by 2007, all Americans—passively, compliantly, and fairly uncomplainingly—would be removing their shoes before getting on planes, would any of us have believed it?

Finally, my administrative assistant, with whom I happened to be discussing the topic of my upcoming *d'var torah* (as I sometimes, but not always, do) reminded me of a recent story in the news regarding the appropriateness—or lack thereof—of going barefoot (or close to it) in the presence of “royalty.” The story concerned a group of women's lacrosse players who met with President Bush at the White House. A widely reproduced photograph revealed that several of the women were wearing flip-flops, which generated much discussion regarding whether or not that was appropriate.⁸

⁷ The story was aired on WBUR at 1:38 pm on Friday, January 12, 2007. The headline for it (copied from the WBUR website) reads as follows:

Scanners Will Let Some Travelers Keep Shoes On

Soon, select airports will feature shoe scanners that can check for explosives while shoes are still on your feet. Fliers who've cleared security checks for “registered traveler” programs will be able to use the scanners. The *Wall Street Journal's* Laura Meckler talks with Luke Burbank about how that may boost “registered traveler” membership.

The audio and transcript are available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6831828> .

⁸ For one version of the AP story with accompanying photograph, see http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-07-19-flip-flops_x.htm .

OK. So now it is 1:59 p.m. on Friday afternoon. It's too late to fuss around too much with the study sheet. Rather than re-doing it, as I would have preferred to do, were it not for the time constraints—exacerbated by my hesitation to choose my topic—I am going to use the same study sheet that I used in 2002. After all, I put a lot of time and energy into the composition of the sheet back then: the revised translations are all mine, as are the selection, organization, and formatting of the material. The quote from R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, which only came to my attention this week, is something that I can bring with me, and present for people to respond to.

[What follows is the final copy of my study sheet:]

Parashat Sh'mot 5767
January 12, 2007

Barefoot in the Synagogue?

(With thanks to Professor Eliezer Bashan, Department of Jewish History, Bar Ilan University)

Barefoot in the Bible:

"Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5) (See also Joshua 5:15)

"David meanwhile went up... weeping as he went; his head was covered and he walked **barefoot**." (II Sam. 15:30)

"Save your **foot** from going **bare**, and your throat from thirst."
(Jeremiah 2:25)

"Previously, the LORD had said to Isaiah... 'Go, untie the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,' which he had done, going naked and barefoot. So shall the king of Assyria drive off the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Nubia, young and old, naked and **barefoot**." (Isaiah 20:2-4)

Barefoot in the Talmudic Period

One may not enter the Holy Mount of the Temple with one's staff, or with one's shoes on or with one's money belt or with one's feet dust-stained. One should also not take a short-cut through it, nor, it goes without saying, spit there." (Mishnah Berakhot 9:5)

What about the synagogue? In Babylonia...

Rabba said: The synagogue is similar to a person's home. Just as in a person's home one does not want it to serve as a thoroughfare for strangers, even though one does not mind spitting within the home or wearing footwear, so too, the synagogue must not be used as a thoroughfare, but spitting and wearing shoes are permitted. (Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 63a)

But in the Land of Israel...

Judah b. Rabbi went into a synagogue and left his sandals outside, and they were stolen. He said, 'Had I not gone into the synagogue, my sandals would not have been stolen.'" (Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Metzia 2, 9)

[Page two begins here]

***Barefoot in the Middle Ages: Conflicting Cultural Norms
What happens when Jews move from Christian Spain to Moslem
Algeria?***

A Teshuvah of Rabbi Solomon b. Simeon b. Tzemah Duran, Algeria (Rashbash, d. 1467):

"Question: You wrote concerning a congregation [of immigrants] that wished to reach consensus that one should not enter the synagogue wearing shoes, due to the contempt in which the Ishmaelites (Moslems) held them. Moreover, there is another [pre-existing]

synagogue in the very same city in which it is the custom not to enter wearing shoes. A few individuals came forward challenging this idea, arguing that Maimonides permitted entering a synagogue in shoes; and now you ask my opinion on the subject.

“Response: “It is well known that a synagogue deserves to be glorified, exalted and respected, keeping any sign of contempt away from it. Respect, however, is anything that people consider as such, ... true respect or contempt are according to the way people think and the mores of the place. For example, in the lands of the Christians, where it is not considered a sign of contempt to enter in one’s shoes, or even to appear in shoes before the monarch, if a person enters a synagogue in one of their cities wearing shoes that does not show contempt. But in these lands [Moslem countries], where it is a sign of contempt to come before dignitaries, not to mention before the king, wearing shoes, in their cities one must not enter a synagogue wearing shoes, since if one does not do so before a king of flesh and blood, all the more so before the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

“Considering the fact that in Christian countries people wear their shoes until they get into bed, one is permitted to enter a synagogue in a Christian city in one’s shoes, but in countries where care is taken [not] to enter the home in shoes ... it is unfitting to sully the house of our Lord... Thus, in the land of Edom [the Christian world], where one does not stand before important people except in footwear, it is forbidden to stand in the house of prayer barefoot. In the land of Ishmael [the Moslem world], where it is customary to stand before dignitaries barefoot, it is permitted [to remove one’s shoes]. The law in this regard varies according to the local custom of what is considered a sign of contempt or of respect ... according to the place and its practices.... It all depends on complying with the custom of the place.”

“Therefore it is a good thing which they sought to do, to avoid being held in contempt by the nation that thought us contemptuous.”

January 12, 2007

2:20 p.m. Final entry before delivering the *d'var torah*:

I'm ready. I am going to remind people of that moment when God told Moses to remove his shoes, and ask people, Why? Why, in this story, is removing shoes associated with being in the presence of God? Is that an association that makes sense to us? If so, why don't we do the same? If not, why not? Is the purpose of removing shoes to help Moses sense the presence of God, or is it a sign of respect for the holy? What helps *us* be conscious that we are in the presence of God? A head covering? Certain clothing? What are sartorial signs of respect in our culture? Are there ever circumstances when we remove an article of clothing as a sign of respect? (Off hand, I can think of several: we would never keep on an overcoat if we were meeting a dignitary. And the practice of removing hats has long been a sign of respect in our society.)

Once we've had the chance to discuss that, I'm hoping that I can review the phenomenon of shoelessness in the Bible and in the talmudic period (as presented in the study sheet), and then, eventually, get to that marvelous *teshuvah* on the second side of the sheet. I know that I will have to be judicious: I will not have time to review in detail every one of the sources. That's fine. They're there for people to review and to pique people's interest as I'm speaking. They're there to make the additional point that all we're doing is reviewing the highlights of a topic that is far deeper and broader than we'll get the chance to discuss in shul. The underlying message: there's more than what meets the eye—more to learn, more to understand, more to enjoy, more to appreciate.

Sunday, January 14, 2007

My preparation for yesterday's *derashah* did not end until the last few moments before it began, as we were singing "*Etz Hayim Hi*," and as the ark was closing. What I had been wondering about all during *shaharit* (the morning service) was, how should I begin? What should I use as the "hook"? How could I engage the group to explore the issue I wanted them to explore?

I'm surprised that the obvious way to do that had not occurred to me until then. But this is not the first time this has happened. It is sometimes a source of distress to me that I am generally unable to figure out

precisely how to frame a *derashah* until it is about to begin, and I am therefore unable to articulate ahead of time precisely how it will flow. On the one hand, this increases its spontaneity and pizzazz; on the other hand, it can be stressful.

During *shaharit*, I came to the conclusion that the best way to spark this discussion would be to do the unexpected: take my shoes off, and lead the discussion in my stocking feet. (The notion of doing so barefoot was too far over the edge for me to consider.) One might think that that would have been obvious. Yet somehow, it hadn't occurred to me until that morning. One might think that this would have ended for me the suspense and the speculation, and would have allowed me to recite *shaharit* with full *kavannah* (attention and focus), but instead I obsessed—as I am wont to do—over the question of whether or not “to frame the frame.” In other words, I wondered whether (a) to simply take my shoes off; or (b) to *draw attention to the fact* that I was taking my shoes off. I decided to do the latter. First, the davenning was taking place in a small room. Only the dozen or so folks in the front—if that many—would see what I was doing, and by the time the others would realize that I was shoeless, they would feel as though they had missed something—a feeling that might inspire some irritation, if not hostility, which could chill the discussion. (In my view, a good Torah discussion requires a nice, gentle, mutually supportive feeling in the room. It must never dissolve into a debate—or, if it does, it must be a good-natured one.) Also, I knew that a bold move like this would be appreciated (and even admired) by some, but would be resented by others. Certain people whom I knew (or speculated) would be irritated by such a gesture would, perhaps, be mollified by an initial comment from me.

I decided to introduce the *derashah* by first moving a chair alongside the Torah reading table. This already drew attention and evoked a giggle from one not very inhibited congregant. I then spoke briefly about the notion of “*l'shem hinukh*”—the idea that sometimes one does things differently “for educational purposes.”

At this point, I had everyone's attention. So I sat down, and I asked out loud, “How does it feel to observe me doing what I'm doing right now?” I proceeded to carefully unlace my shoes and then to take them off.

There were a few—just a few—startled expressions. Most people had amused expressions on their faces.

At first, the reactions were muted. People weren't sure what to say, because the question had focused on a feeling. I generally don't do this right at the start of a *derashah*—if at all—because people are reluctant to “open up” and talk about feelings in the presence of the community. But I wanted or needed to push this along quickly. (The *haftarah* had taken longer than usual and we were running late.)

After one or two tepid, innocuous, and not very illuminating comments, one person said, “It feels odd.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you never do that—*we* never do that—in shul,” she said. Others quickly chimed in.

“It feels comfortable.”

“It's relaxing.”

“It's informal.”

“It doesn't feel like shul.”

“It feels Japanese.”

“It reminds one of a house of *shiva*.”

“It feels like we're at home, rather than out.”

This led very quickly to a discussion among several women concerning how grateful they are when they are able to take off their (generally uncomfortable) shoes.

“Does it evoke holiness?” I asked. Before anyone could respond, I continued, “Sure, in the Bible, as we saw in today's *parashah*, we know that somehow taking off one's shoes is a sign that one is in the presence of holiness, but is that the case today?” We continued discussing this issue. One person said that it seemed as though when someone takes off his shoes it reveals his or her vulnerability and inferiority—but another said that it connoted superiority! No one seemed to associate it with holiness. We got through the notion that, yes, priests did serve barefoot in the ancient Temple, and therefore, when *kohanim* perform the *birkat kohanim* today [not the practice in our congregation] they remove their shoes, but since none of us does that automatically when we enter a synagogue, and we don't do it when we pray, shoelessness doesn't, in general, have that connotation for us.

One mother said, “This is an amazing coincidence. As we were getting ready to go to shul this morning, my son [who was due to become a bar mitzvah three weeks later] resisted putting on his shoes. ‘I don't want

to wear shoes today,' he said. 'But you *have to*,' I said. 'We go to a Shoe-Wearing Shul!'"

"Wow," I said. "But what if ours were a Shoeless Shul? What then?"

"Then we probably wouldn't be here!" she responded.

After a few minutes of enjoyable, lively comments, with hands rising faster than I could call on them, I said that we were going to examine the appropriateness of shoelessness versus shoe-wearing in holy places in the Jewish tradition. I passed out the study sheets. We went through the first page of the study sheet fairly quickly, with me teaching the texts. Then, since twenty minutes had already flown by, I turned to the *teshuvah* on the second page. "This," I said, "is a *delightful teshuvah*." I don't usually comment like that, but I couldn't help myself. The insight, the understanding contained within this *teshuvah*, I found fascinating. And I also loved the humanity, the compassion of the author: the way in which he empathized with the immigrants who'd come from a place where it was "*pas nisht*" (unseemly) to take off one's shoes in public, and had come to a place where it was "*pas nisht*" to wear them!

I used that as a segue to thinking about today. I brought up the case of the Northwestern University women's lacrosse team, and their appearance in flip-flops before the President of the United States. (I suddenly realized that the parents of a Northwestern freshman were sitting in the room—an odd coincidence of the sort one must always be prepared for.) I talked about what it's like today when people who aren't regular davenners come into shul. Some people, I said, dress in a very revealing manner in shul—and yet within the cultural context in which they live, it is most likely entirely appropriate. I began to suggest that our study could help us be more understanding and accepting of different attitudes toward clothing.

Finally, as I wrapped up our discussion, I said that this should inspire us to think about how our clothing contributes to—or interferes with—our ability to access the holy.

And at that, I said, "Shabbat shalom," and sat down to put my shoes back on. "So now you're putting them back on!" someone cried out. "Yes," I said. "Because we now have the practice, specifically, of *not* davenning in our bare feet."

There were many interesting follow-up conversations during *kidush*, the light meal offered after services. One congregant (an Israeli)

talked about how, when the army captures prisoners of war, one of the first things they do is have the prisoners remove their shoes. There was also the inevitable: another congregant pulled me aside to tell me that I ought to choose my socks more carefully. (She had noticed a tiny hole in one of my socks during the *derashah*.)⁹

Do I regret not speaking about MLK? We did announce the community-wide service in a local church to take place tomorrow, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, in which a number of young people from our congregation will be participating, so I don't feel as bad as I otherwise would have. Had we celebrated a bar or bat mitzvah yesterday, had two hundred people been in the room on that day, then I would have felt compelled to speak on a weightier theme. But neither was the case. In retrospect, I'm glad I did what I did.

The December Dilemma and the Exodus Generation: Preparing a Torah Discussion for *Parashat Sh'mot* (December 29, 2007)

December 24, 2007

It just happened. The moment. The realization that I know what I'm going to talk about this Shabbat. Because I've got a few moments, and I'm alone in front of my computer, I'm going to jot down my sensations at this moment, and my recollections of how this came to be.

Until yesterday, I really hadn't given much thought to [the book of] Exodus. After all, I've been speaking about *Bereishit* (Genesis) for several

⁹ As Professor Lewin convincingly demonstrates, there are risks whenever teachers seek to use themselves as objects to illustrate their points. For a particularly telling example, see segment #8 of lecture #11, "Work and Mechanical Energy," of Physics 8.01 (Physics 1, Classical Mechanics), recorded on October 4, 1999. (<http://ocw.mit.edu/ocwweb/Physics/8-01Physics-ifall1999/videolectures/detail/Video-Segment-Index-for-L-11.htm>.) According to the MIT website, the topic of this segment is the following: "A wrecking ball is converting gravitational potential energy into kinetic energy and back and forth. If released with zero speed, the wrecking ball should NOT swing higher than its height when it was released. Professor Lewin puts his life on the line by demonstrating this." (A picture capturing the moment of truth appears at: <http://ocw.mit.edu/ocwweb/Physics/8-01Physics-ifall1999/coursehome/index.htm>.)

months. I've been teaching a *Parashat Ha-shavua* class on *Sefer B'reishit*, which just came to an end, for almost as long. The last session of the class was last Tuesday night. We don't have a Shabbat *minchah* minyan [at which the beginning of the next week's *parashah* would be read] and so, until yesterday, I hadn't given *Sh'mot* much thought.

Yesterday, as I was going through the Sunday [*New York*] *Times*, a piece caught my attention. On the "Op-Art" page at the end of the Week in Review section of the paper was a comic strip entitled "The Creche." It told the story of a complexly interfaith couple. (The wife is a "non-believing half-Jew with Armenian Christian roots" and the husband is an "Italian, Sicilian, Irish and English" man who experienced a "spiritual awakening" several years ago.) The strip tells the story of the December dilemma in one particular American household. As I read it, I don't recall thinking, "This would be a good thing to share in shul some upcoming Shabbat morning." But I did think, "This would be a neat thing to share at some point with someone."

I routinely receive *divrei torah* from Bar-Ilan University. One, whose title I glanced at yesterday, was on "The Jewishness of the Children of Israel in Egypt."¹⁰ That reminded me that *Sh'mot* is coming, that I will have to be giving *divrei torah* on *Sh'mot*. It also reminded me of that classic midrash on how and why the Children of Israel remained distinctive in Egypt. "They didn't change their language, they didn't change their names," etc. But I didn't give it much thought. I've spoken about that before. No "buzz" occurred in my head this time. Besides, it was a busy and stressful day. I had just learned that a gentle, kindly, older member of the congregation has just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It's very progressed and his prognosis is not good. My mother-in-law has recently moved to a nursing home, and we have had to clear out her apartment. In addition, I was having difficulty scheduling a visit by a cantor applying for a job at our shul, and I learned that we have been having difficulty covering a *shiva* minyan at the shul. Finally, my two kids were home from college, and I wanted to spend at least a little time with them.

In any event, it wasn't until this morning (Monday morning) that the spark occurred. I didn't attend morning minyan. I had to attend to

¹⁰ Moshe Kaveh, "Hazeht Ha-yehudit Shel Am Yisrael: Hearot l'farashat 'Shmot'," *Bar-Ilan University Daf Shevui*, #736.

a few phone calls before going into the office. But then, as I was about to eat breakfast, and my wife was about to leave for work herself, I saw yesterday's paper on the dining room table. It was turned to the Maureen Dowd column on the op-ed page. My kids always like reading Maureen Dowd—as do I—so it occurred to me to cut it out of the paper and stick it onto the refrigerator. I went and got the paper cutter. As I was about to cut the article out, I turned the page over to see if there was anything on the other side worth saving. That's when I, once again, saw the cartoon. It suddenly occurred to me that I shouldn't rip it apart, that my wife, Elana, who works professionally with interfaith couples, might want to see this and to use it in her work. And so I put the paper cutter down. I picked up the paper and went upstairs and showed it to my wife. She was rushing around, and so simply said, "Great. Thanks a lot. Just leave it here." A few minutes later, she came down to breakfast with it, and looked at it. I pointed out how interesting I found the last panel of the strip. We spoke about it, and I realized that we had different understandings of it. I glanced at the cartoon and realized that I had misread the last panel, and so I now had a totally different understanding of the cartoon. We talked about it, about the challenges of working with interfaith families, etc. And then she left.

And then it suddenly occurred to me out of the blue that I could teach this cartoon as a text. This would accomplish several things, one of them being to alert people that the phenomenon of intermarriage is so much more complex than most people think. The old paradigms just aren't as useful as they used to be—certainly not the traditional understanding that one intermarries as a rejection of Judaism.

And then, a connection was suddenly made between this piece and the title of the Bar-Ilan *d'var torah* that I had seen yesterday. Not only was this a useful piece to teach, but it was a piece appropriate to teach *this coming Shabbat*, for it was, literally, on an *inyana d'yoma* (an issue of the day)—given that Christmas is coming this week. (Admittedly, as my daughter reminded me a few minutes ago, Christmas will be behind us by next Shabbat. But my thought was that as long as we're in between Christmas and New Year's Day, as long as we're in December, it's still appropriate and useful to talk about the December dilemma.) And it is also appropriate to teach this text for *Parashat Sh'mot*, as seen through the lens of the rabbinic authors of that famous midrash of the Israelites' retention of their distinctive practices in Egypt.

For consider the following proposition: isn't one possible contemporary version of "They did not change their names, they did not change their language," the following: "They did not put up a Christmas tree" or "They did not put up a crèche in their living room"? Yes! That's certainly an appropriate proposition, with which one might agree or disagree, a perfect topic for a discussion which would accomplish several goals. First, it would make the point that shul is the place to discuss real issues. The question of how much Christmas interfaith families should bring into their homes is a very real dilemma that affects many members of our congregation. Second, such a discussion would be a reminder that the issues of today are not only the issues of today. They were the issues of the rabbinic period as well—as convincingly demonstrated by that famous midrash. Not only in twenty-first-century America, but also in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, Jews have found themselves wondering how far to go in embracing the practices of their environment. This would allow me to teach that wonderful midrash, thereby demonstrating the relevance of studying these ancient texts—which can live and breathe today, if only we let them.

But is this the *best* time to teach this text? After all, there won't be that many people in shul this coming Shabbat. I could get a lot more "mileage" out of teaching these "texts" (by which I mean the comic strip and the midrash) on a Shabbat when we would expect four hundred people, rather than sixty. On what other occasions could I teach this? Well, we're expecting a Keruv Shabbat sometime in March. That's not a bad time. But by then, talking about Christmas will really seem like warmed-over cholent. And a midrash on the Exodus just won't seem appropriate to teach then. Maybe I could put it off until Pesach, but again, who wants to think about Christmas then? All things considered, the excitement of striking while the iron is hot seems irresistible.

Now, what's odd is that the thought processes that I've described above (in the preceding few paragraphs) took place in about a second. That is, long before I had realized how to verbally articulate what I had come to understand, I had had a serendipitous moment of pedagogic insight. I call it serendipity because one never knows whether it is going to happen or not. Readiness, as Rosenzweig would say, is all. This is why I try to give myself some time on Monday mornings to "make it happen"—that is, to allow it to happen, which is the most I can do. In this case, had I gone ahead and attended to pressing matters, had I begun

returning emails and responding to phone calls, I might not have allowed the *d'var torah* to develop in quite the way that it did.

[I did not write a diary entry after this *d'var torah* was delivered.¹¹]

Comparing and Contrasting Two Different *Derashot* for *Sh'mot* (A Year Apart)

What did the processes of deciding what to talk about on these two Shabbatot in 2007 have in common with one another? What principles might we derive that could be useful, either to me or to other *darshanim*, in the future?

The "Aha!" Moment

In both cases, there was an "Aha!" moment—or, actually, several "Aha!" moments. In each case, the key serendipitous moment at which I realized what I was going to talk about included an awareness of (a) a connection to the Torah portion of the week; (b) some element, issue or theme in a rabbinic text or texts that (c) mirrors some aspect of American culture that I believe is—or should be—at the forefront of the consciousness of the members of my congregation, and that is itself explored in yet another, modern "text." Simultaneously or eventually came (d) the discovery of an interesting, intriguing, and possibly even fun way to share that with the congregation. When all of those elements are present, as they were in these two cases, a spark goes off.

In the first case, the key moment occurred as I was preparing to go to shul on a Tuesday morning. I wasn't thinking of the need to come up with a topic to address four days later—but it's hard to believe that, after sixteen years of writing *derashot* virtually every week, my brain doesn't start doing that on its own. That particular week I didn't begin thinking consciously about the *parashah* until Tuesday. So it is quite possible that, internally, a certain level of anxiety had already arisen and part of my consciousness was already focused on solving my weekly

¹¹ The obverse side of the study sheet for *Parashat Sh'mot*, December 29, 2007, contained the English and Hebrew text of *Midrash Tehillim* 114:4. For the reverse side, see <http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2007/12/23/opinion/23opart.ready.html>

puzzle. I wish I could remember whether, on January 9, I was putting on my shoes as that moment occurred. Even if I had just done so a few minutes earlier, it's quite possible that that action precipitated this particular "Aha!" moment. The full form that the *derashah* would eventually take unfolded over several days, and I didn't make the final decisions regarding how I would present the material until a few moments before delivery.

Similarly, on that Monday morning in December during the week when we were again reading *Parashat Sh'mot*, I found myself absent-mindedly and inadvertently being drawn to that comic strip, that graphic "text" that I had noticed, yet not quite set aside. Was it entirely coincidental that I almost cut it into pieces? Did that somehow trigger an internal investigation into whether it wasn't indeed more worthwhile, more worth saving, than I had thought? The fundamental flash of insight came to me as I somehow connected two unrelated ideas that had crossed my mind during the preceding day. Somehow, as I was reflecting on the comic strip after discussing it with my wife, the national holiday (Christmas) that was about to take place, that familiar midrash on how and why the Jews were redeemed from Egypt, and the next book of the Torah from which we were about to read came into my mind, and the spark flew. Additional insights concerning the precise way in which I would deliver the *derashah* wouldn't be made until days later, and the final decisions wouldn't be made until the day I delivered it.

Could those "Aha!" moments happen on their own? It's hard to say. I don't think I would ever really risk that by, say, ignoring the *parashah* of the week until Shabbat.¹² The fact is, I make myself conducive to being inspired. I begin reviewing the *parashah* early each week; sometimes this is enough to inspire me. Before the age of email, I would deliberately open up my file for the upcoming *parashah*. Now, I subscribe to various *d'var torah* listservs that engage me with germane ideas. By now, I look forward to that feeling—of delight, of joy, of satisfaction—when a curi-

¹² It's not coincidental that my vacation weeks generally go from Sunday to Sunday. The thought of leaving the office on a Friday—as tempting as it has sometimes been—is accompanied by the dread of returning to it on a Friday. Given the kind of thinking I would likely find myself doing, it would be the functional equivalent of returning on a Tuesday or a Wednesday.

ous, interesting, enlightening connection is made, and by now, I know it when I experience it.

I suppose that I have developed a heightened awareness of the potential for connections among ideas—particularly during the first part of every week! By now, even though it isn't an item on my calendar, I "know" that I must make such a connection during those days—and the sooner the better.

Doubt

Doubt in the wisdom of my choice can arise even when I least expect it. With respect to my two *derashot* on *Parashat Sh'mot* in 2007, there was doubt in both cases. Even though in those cases I ultimately did speak on the topic that occurred to me during the "Aha!" moments, I wasn't sure—until almost the last moment—that I would.

In the first case, my doubt was focused on whether it was appropriate not to speak about Martin Luther King, Jr., on the Shabbat closest to the day commemorating his birth. But doubt plagued me before I delivered my December Sh'mot *derashah* as well. First, I wondered whether it was appropriate to talk about Christmas. Was it appropriate to share in shul the reflections of an intermarried Jew celebrating Christmas with her family? My reservations concerned whether it was appropriate to introduce empathically an interfaith couple's set of conflicts. (That was not difficult for me to resolve, but it did require me to formulate responses in the event that I would be challenged by congregants during kiddush.) Also, I had a practical doubt: I wondered (up to the day of delivery) whether it wouldn't make more sense to refrain from delivering the *derashah*, to hold onto it for another, "better" occasion.

In the days immediately before I delivered that *derashah*, I faced doubts based on an uncanny similarity with the January date on which I had spoken on *Parashat Sh'mot*. On December 27th, 2007, former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi, two weeks before national elections in which she was a leading opposition candidate were scheduled to take place. I recall being saddened and depressed by the news of her killing. Were she an American or Israeli political leader, there is no doubt that I would have shelved my *derashah*

and spoken about her.¹³ Perhaps part of the temptation to speak about Bhutto arose from her charm and charisma, and from the fact that she had lived and studied in the Boston area during her youth. There is no question that I could have delivered a sermon about Bhutto's life which could have touched on the question of the challenges and risks inherent in liberation struggles—nicely linked with the themes of the *parashah*.

But Benazir Bhutto was a complicated figure. In the words of an article about her (published in Boston a week after her death), "Like her country, Bhutto is a riddle. Brilliant, beautiful, fearless, she is also ruthlessly ambitious, devious and corrupt."¹⁴ Moreover, as troubling as the news of the assassination might be, I believed that it wasn't as significant for American Jews as the assassinations of, say, Martin Luther King, Jr., or John F. Kennedy, and therefore did not demand a *derashah* focused on the event. I therefore decided to go with my original plan.

In both January and December, it wasn't entirely clear until the last minute how I would address the topic. In both cases, I knew that I had a great discussion topic (so I knew that I wasn't going to deliver a formal sermon), but in both cases I wasn't sure how to frame the discussion. In January, it wasn't until the morning of the *derashah* that I discovered, or determined, that I would be taking my shoes off. In December, I wasn't sure what would be the most effective technique for introducing a cartoon that, through photocopying, had been reduced in size, and was therefore difficult to read. (I eventually decided to have someone read it out loud. I almost decided to have different people read the different

¹³ That is what I did after the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and after the deaths of Israeli diplomat Abba Eban and former U.S. president Ronald Reagan. See, e.g., <http://www.templealiyah.com/uploadedFiles/site/About/Leadership/Rabbi/ShlachLcha%202004.pdf> and <http://www.templealiyah.com/uploadedFiles/site/About/Leadership/Rabbi/Vayishlach%202002.pdf>.

An anecdote: My late father-in-law, Rabbi Simcha Kling, z"l, a pulpit rabbi for over forty years, once told me that he always tried to complete his two Shabbat *derashot* by Wednesday, knowing that on Thursday or Friday he might have to officiate at a funeral and be unable to do much writing. He told me that the only time he recalled tearing up his sermon and starting from scratch late in the week was on Friday, November 22, 1963, the day on which President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

¹⁴ Gail Sheehy, "A Wrong Must Be Righted," *Parade Magazine*, January 6, 2008, 6.

voices in the text, and were I to do it again, I would make that choice.) In the case of the December *derashah*, the appearance of a comic strip alongside a rabbinic midrash was enough of a curiously jarring juxtaposition that I felt additional theatrics were unnecessary.

What Makes for a Successful Choice?

Looking back over both of my *Sh'mot derashot*, and reflecting on many others, what seems to unite them is that the subject matter is “on the edge.” I know I have found a suitable topic for a *derashah* when I know that it has the potential to encourage people to look at something familiar in a new way.¹⁵ In the context of a Shabbat morning service, the mode of presentation provides some comfort and security even (or especially) when the topic raises questions that may be either uncomfortable or at least unusual in the synagogue setting. For example, in January we talked about fashion and holy places—neither, ironically, a very common topic to talk about in shul. In December, we talked openly about interfaith relationships—a very hot-button issue for many, and again, something we don’t discuss often (enough) in shul.

In the case of both of my *Sh'mot derashot*, it seems to me that the “Aha!” moments occurred because I was ready for them to occur. Both times, I was eager for a moment that would allow me to present yet another juxtaposition of the two cultures of which I feel so much a part, and that I so much want my congregants to see in one unified field of view. I believe that it is essential to consider a variety of approaches to one’s pedagogic task. Otherwise, one can be too quick to dismiss a quirky and off-beat idea that might, nonetheless, ultimately prove to be the core of a successful *derashah*.

Finally, in deciding what material to present and how to present it, I think that it is necessary to be willing to be playful. Being playful is not inconsistent with caring deeply about one’s educational mission. A good model is Professor Lewin, whose work I described at the beginning of

¹⁵ I am reminded of the title of a presentation given by Dr. David Starr at “Teaching Rabbinic Literature: Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy,” a conference at Brandeis University in January 2008: “Making the Strange Familiar, The Familiar Strange: Teaching Rabbinics to Adults in Me’ah.” In several respects, I aim to do the same thing when I present rabbinic teachings in synagogue on Shabbat mornings.

this chapter. A more playful teacher—a more enthusiastic teacher, who loves his subject and loves presenting it more than Professor Lewin—is hard to imagine.¹⁶ It is not surprising that Lewin, who creates enchanting moments of engagement in his classroom, is successful at what he does; his enthusiasm, excitement, and playfulness is inviting.

To conclude, let me again quote Rosenzweig, who discusses the vital role that a teacher's enthusiasm and excitement play in his or her teaching. "To begin with," he tells instructors of adult Jewish education,

[D]on't offer [one's students] anything. Listen. And words will come to the listener, and they will join together and form desires. And desires are the messengers of confidence.... The teacher cannot be a teacher according to a plan. He must be much more and much less, a master and at the same time a pupil. It will not be enough that he himself knows or that he himself can teach. He must be capable of something quite different—he must be able to "desire."¹⁷

¹⁶ One can hear the playfulness in his voice as he invites his students to observe him closely, as he does at the end of lecture 10 (<http://ocw.mit.edu/ocwweb/Physics/8-01Physics-iffall1999/videlectures/detail/Video-Segment-Index-for-L-10.htm>) and also at the end of lecture 11 (<http://ocw.mit.edu/ocwweb/Physics/8-01Physics-iffall1999/videlectures/detail/Video-Segment-Index-for-L-11.htm>). In both cases, the camera picks up many signs of amusement on the part of his students.

¹⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, "Toward a Renaissance of Jewish Learning," 69.