

Rabbi Steve Cohen  
 Friday night, December 2, 2016  
 Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

I know that our Bar Mitzvah this weekend, Isaac Lewis, feels a deep connection to the story we read from the Torah this week, the story of Yitzchak, the first Isaac, who lived approximately four thousand years ago. What would that first Isaac have thought, if he were told that two parents...two of his descendents, living in a distant faraway land four thousand years in the future would name their Isaac. His mind would have boggled. Our minds should boggle. Let's tell again part of that Isaac's story. (Tell the story).

For years, I have wondered about the father's blessing. Why did it matter so intensely to all of them? Isaac wanted so badly to bless his son before he died. Rebekah was willing to risk destroying her family, all because she cared so much about that blessing, and that Jacob be the one to receive it. Clearly, Jacob and Esau both craved their father's blessing. When Esau learned that his father had blessed his brother, he cried out in despair "have you reserved no blessing for me father?"

I understand that this story happened a long, long time ago...in a very different world from ours. But I also believe that deep down people have not changed much since ancient times. We human beings still seek the same things....love and pleasure, good health and to be remembered.... exactly the same things that people prayed for thousands of years ago. This is one of the things I love about the Torah. The people in that distant world are just like us.

But having said that, my father never summoned me saying "go hunt some game and feed me so that my soul may bless you." I am certain I never heard him use those words! In our family growing up, my parents did not observe the custom of blessing us, their children, before Shabbat dinner. So I have wondered: "Is there some universal human experience, something that can occur between parent and child, even today, and which in the ancient world was called blessing?" To make this question extremely personal: "Did my father ever bless me?"

Exactly one week ago, on the Friday after Thanksgiving, my extended family gathered in Rochester New York for the unveiling of my father's gravestone. My mother, Marian and I and our now grown children Rachel and Ari, and Rachel's husband Zach, and my sister Sharon and her husband Shimi and their two grown children Daniel and Tali, and my brother David and his wife Liz and their three grown children Molly, Ethan and Sim. The descendents and their spouses of Jules Cohen, gathered around his grave. Standing there in the late Rochester autumn, I thought back to one of my best memories of my dad. I was twenty-five years old, just the age that the next generation are now, and I was about to go off traveling, on my own for a year. My father told me that he was jealous, and just a little nervous, and then he said: "but you have good judgement."

My father did not say the words "I give you my blessing," which would have sounded completely wierd coming from him. And he did not say "Make sure to use good judgement," which would have let me know clearly that he was really worried, that I would use bad judgement! He simply said "You have good judgement." Now some of you may disagree. But with those words, my father blessed me. He told me something about myself, that I had not known, and that would protect me for the rest of my life.

We do still need our parent's blessing today, just as much as people did four thousand years ago....even if we use different words. And we still want to give our children our own blessing, before we die. It was not simple for Isaac and his sons, and for us today, still, it's not simple. Last Friday, standing with my own children and nieces and nephews at my father's grave, now that he is gone, I was grateful for the gift he gave me so long ago. Words of love, and truth and protection....spoken from his heart. My father blessed me. How do I bless my children?

Earlier in the day, a number of us had gone to Rochester's older cemetery, more famous Mt. Hope cemetery. Mt. Hope! Isn't that a wonderful name for a cemetery? My daughter Rachel, 28 years old, was leading us on a pilgrimage to the grave of Susan B. Anthony, the most famous figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's suffrage movement, the fight for women's right to vote. Born in Massachusetts in 1820, Susan B Anthony moved to Rochester when she was 25 and not long after became the life-long friend and partner in activism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the author of the Seneca Falls Statement of Principles of Women's Rights, the founding document of the movement for Women's Rights. In the early years of her activism, Susan B Anthony was ridiculed and scorned, and accused of seeking to undermine the institution of marriage. In 1872 she was arrested for attempting to vote, and convicted in a trial that received national attention.

On the third day of the trial, the judge asked Anthony whether she had anything to say. She responded with the most famous speech in the history of the agitation for woman suffrage. Repeatedly ignoring the judge's order to stop talking and sit down, she protested what she called "this high-handed outrage upon my citizen's rights ... you have trampled under foot every vital principle of our government. My natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights, are all ignored." She was convicted, and ordered to pay a fine of \$100, to which she responded "I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty", and she never did.

In July 2016, on the day after Hillary Clinton obtained the nomination at the Democratic National Convention, Rochester's first ever woman mayor, Lovely Warren, put a red, white and blue sign next to Anthony's grave which stated, "Dear Susan B., we thought you might like to know that for the first time in history, a woman is running for president representing a major party. 144 years ago, your illegal vote got you arrested. It took another 48 years for women to finally gain the right to vote. Thank you for paving the way."

We stood there by Susan B's grave last Friday afternoon, in the Rochester drizzle. The sign was no longer there, but the grave was still piled with flowers and stones, and buttons that said "I voted". We took a group picture there, surrounding my daughter, our leader, and she immediately posted the picture to Facebook with the message "so thankful for all the fierce feminists in my life." The "likes" began pouring in, from friends of ours all over the world, including by the way some friends who voted for Trump.

Nearby in the same cemetery is the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, born into slavery but escaped to the north when he was about 20 years old, and became a friend of Susan B Anthony and one of the greatest orators of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frederick Douglas was the only African American to attend the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848. At that convention, many in attendance were in favor of equal rights for women but were not yet ready for the truly extreme measure...at that time...of actually giving women the right to vote. Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave, the only black at the convention, stood up and argued

that Women's Rights must include the right to vote. His speech swept the convention, launching the 70 year march to women's suffrage.

How very fitting that Susan B Anthony and Frederick Douglass are resting nearby each other in a cemetery named Mount Hope.

We ran out of time, and so we went back the next day, to Mount Hope cemetery...but this time to the Jewish section, the section belonging to my childhood synagogue, Temple Brith Kodesh. It was drizzling again. And the ground was covered with a carpet of brilliant yellow fallen leaves. It had been many years since I walked in that section, so we did not know exactly where the family graves were. It was quiet, and wet, and we were walking without a map on a magical thick carpet of soft yellow leaves and suddenly we came to the red stone monument of Ephraim and Eva Eidlin, my mother's parents. Then just one row away, Dora Cohen, my father's mother, next to her sister Ida and her brothers Ben and Isadore and their wives Hash and Bertha. And nearby their father, my great-grandfather Max Goldstein, the tailor. We turned around and walked a short distance and came to Marian's grandparents, Sam Schonfeld and his wife Mattie, whose name we gave to our daughter Rachel to be her middle name.

Visiting all of those who had gone before us, both Marian's and my grandparents and great grandparents, I felt like saying something like that sign that Rochester's mayor had put at Susan B Anthony's grave. "Thank you for paving the way." The journey from Seneca Falls to Women's Suffrage took over 70 years, and then another almost one hundred until a woman was nominated for President by a major party. And although Rachel was crying, and to be honest so was I, as we stood there thinking about how close we had come,.....we are still on the journey. And as we travel, we are still receiving the love, the truth and the protection of the great women and men who went before us.

Thank you for paving the way.

Shabbat Shalom.