

Torah Portion: R'ei

I spent this summer running a teen program in San Francisco - It was a truly amazing experience that I could talk about for hours (and feel free to ask me about it if you're interested) but tonight I want to focus on one specific moment.

Near the end of the summer, we ran a program loosely titled "Let's get vulnerable". It was about each person breaking down barriers within themselves and trusting the group to support them and allow them to essentially strip themselves of all of their defenses.

The pivotal piece of the program asked each person to move to their own space in the room and individually write down a sentence, a phrase, something they were scared to say out loud, something big about themselves, something they hadn't told people, something they didn't necessarily want to tell people.

Surrounding that sentence, on the same piece of paper, they were instructed to write down all of the reasons that made it difficult to say out loud - it scares me, it sounds hypocritical, no one will understand, I'm afraid of what people will think.

Then, one by one, each of these 16yearolds stood up in front of the entire group and read off that list of reasons. Afterward, they tore off the pieces of paper that had the reasons written on them and burned each piece. And once all that was left was the piece of paper with the original sentence, they spoke out loud that thing that they had previously been unable to say.

There is something incredibly moving about supporting someone through their moment of intense vulnerability, of being witness to their deepest fear or anxiety, of standing in solidarity with them against the thing that scares them the most.

There is true power in saying something out loud.

At the end of the program, after everyone had shared this really difficult thing, we meshed into a group hug and on the count of three, we yelled the

words "I love you". They weren't directed at anyone in particular, but they were definitely audible far far from where we were standing in a parking garage on the campus of San Francisco State University.

And that moment, that release of tension was also important and also really powerful.

The Israelites get a moment of commanded voice release as well, during our Torah portion this week, Re'ei. The portion is all about the Israelites finally entering the land. The portion begins with a doozy of a statement: "Re'ei!" says God. "LOOK: I set before you today blessing and curse". God puts forth these two opposites, these two big ideas, as if there's a choice – you can either choose blessing, follow Gods commandments, or be cursed because you DIDN'T follow Gods commandments.

But then God goes on to instruct the Israelites that once they've entered the land, they are to climb mountain A (Mt. Gerizim) and shout a blessing off of that mountain and then walk over to mountain B (Mt. Eval), climb mountain B, and shout a curse off of mountain B. It's not a question anymore, it's not a choice. You don't choose to yell the blessing or yell the curse - you are required to yell them both.

It is safe to assume that God wants the Israelites, wants US to choose blessing, so why yell out the curse?

I think it's all about putting it out there – it is hard to avoid something if you don't know what that something is. So the idea behind yelling out a curse is that if you scream something loud enough, shout it from the mountaintop, everyone hears it, everyone knows what to avoid.

Once it's said out loud, we can do something about it. Once something is defined, steps can be taken to make sure that thing doesn't happen – or doesn't happen again...or simply stops happening.

This idea, of being commanded to yell out a curse or maybe even just something that's hard for you to say out loud, is really tied into Elul.

This coming Monday night is Rosh Hodesh Elul, the first of the month of Elul. Elul is the last month before the High Holy Days. There's nothing you have to do during this month – no fast days, no festivals, no commemorations, which is weird, because as I'm sure you all know, Judaism is all about holidays and rituals and festivals.

There is a reason for this seeming lack of ritual events. Elul is set aside specifically for people to prepare for the High Holy Days.

That's another things Jews really like to do, we like to prepare for the preparing of the actual thing.

So if Yom Kippur is the DAY of Atonement then the ten days leading to the Day of Atonement are for repenting and Rosh Hashana is the beginning of that repenting then Elul is the preparation for the preparation of the repenting in time for the day of atonement.

And that's a good thing because the process of repentance is really long and involved. And you have to start way before other people - you have to start with yourself, you have to start with that thing you can't say out loud. You have to start by defining the curse so that you can move forward. And then, once you're healthy in mind, body and spirit, then it's possible to really be present both when you ask for forgiveness and also when you are asked for forgiveness.

Like that first step to recovery from so many things, there is a power and importance to standing up and saying "Hi. My name is Dusty and I'm a fallible human being." Or better yet, climbing a mountain and screaming it from the summit.

My blessing for us, as we move into this month of Elul is that we all have the time to really vocalize to our selves those things that we need to work on, those habits we need to curb, that help we need to ask for, so that by Erev

Rosh Hashana we are truly prepared to begin thinking about our larger interactions with the rest of the world.

8/26/2011 10:01:00 PM

8/26/2011 10:01:00 PM