Vayeilech 5786
September 27, 2025
Bnei Mitzvah of Jon and Andy Ohashi-Freed

Jon and Andy, what meaningful divrei Torah. Jon, you taught us about servant leadership, challenging us to find servant leaders in our world, and to define leadership more subtly and closer to home than we might otherwise do. And Andy, you taught us about the power of remembering who we are.

These two messages are particularly meaningful on Shabbat Shuvah, as we stand between our new year celebration and our day of atonement, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we engage in the most intense period of self-reflection, responsibility-taking, assessment of how we have been living and what specifically we need to repair. This is a time when we consider what we need to redress, what we need to change in our behavior and within ourselves, and when we stretch to find within ourselves the capacity to forgive as the people around us also look inward and find remorse and seek to change.

Andy, you're telling us that in order to do that well, we have to remember who we are and where we come from. That in remembering we will understand better who we're meant to be, not in some abstract blank slate kind of way, but in response to the strivings and hopes of our ancestors. Recognizing that we are who we are because they were who they were. And just as we need to make our own way, our foundation is our starting point. And Jon, you want us to see leadership not just in the halls of power, but in the people around us, and in ourselves. The kind of leadership you want us to hold up is the kind that Moses displayed, of humility, of service.

Rather than think of leadership as something done with a microphone, you want us to look more carefully and see leadership being exercised in quiet ways all around us. Which means that none of us can say we are not capable of leading. None of us have an excuse to evade the responsibility of leadership, if leadership can be done by anyone in any place. If leadership looks like resilience. If leadership looks like determination and hard work and sacrifice for your values.

Andy, the verse you focused on, וְעַתָּה כִּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת Now therefore write for yourselves this song Deut. 31:19, has been interpreted by our Rabbis to mean not just the song we hear in Haazinu, and not just the book of Deuteronomy, but the entire Torah. And it's been interpreted to mean not just Moses being commanded to write the song, but everyone. The verse says "lachem" "to all of you." Many of our ancient Rabbis

therefore see this as the last commandment, the 613th commandment, of the Torah, to the whole Jewish people.

In the Mishneh Torah, in the laws of tefillin, mezuzah and sefer Torah (7:1), Maimonides says, “Every Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for themselves, as it says, ‘Now therefore write this song for yourselves,’ meaning, ‘Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song.’”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sees this as poetic. “It was as if [Moses] were saying to the next generation, and all future generations: Do not think it is enough to be able to say, ‘My ancestors received the Torah from Moses.’ You must take it and make it new in every generation.”

So writing the Torah for ourselves is about remembering where we come from, but it’s also about making it new. It’s not sacrilegious to reinterpret Torah, to adapt it and apply it in new ways. Quite the opposite. It is essential. We *have* to make it ours so that it speaks to us in the ways we need in our own time.

And this is a time, right now, 2025 in the United States of America, when we need guidance. We need Torah, and we need to use Torah in order to lead. In all the ways you described Jon, quietly or loudly, with determination and purpose, as servants to a cause greater than ourselves – a cause for compassion, for human dignity, for fairness, for freedom, for justice, for love, for peace.

It starts with very small acts. For example: seeing the people around us, and looking for ways to make a small difference in their lives. A kind word or act for a neighbor, being generous with someone who is vulnerable, going out of our way to be loving to the people we live with, looking for opportunities at work or at school to support our fellow workers or students, being a voice of conscience at work or at school; showing up in the public square to stand for our values and for people in danger, and for our humanity.

Passivity, silence, neutrality, that is not what Jews do in a moment like this. We lead, every one of us, with courage, and with resilience.

We do not have to do it alone. That network of the people around us that we’re going to be filling with caring actions, that’s going to be what keeps us safe, that’s going to be

what makes us strong. Community, like this one, is where we build the world we want to live in, just in miniature. No matter what is happening out there. We have control in here, and we can decide that everyone is equal, no matter where they were born or what their race is. We can decide that people of all genders and sexual orientations are equal. We can decide here, that no one will be alone, and anyone in need will be cared for. We can decide to support each other to do courageous things, like accompanying asylum seekers at court when ICE might be there, like standing vigil in the street now and if the national guard comes. Like marching for our values. We can decide that we will not be powerless, but together we will be powerful, as we learn how to be profoundly nonviolent and consistently demonstrate our values. The next big opportunity is the No Kings March on October 18th. No matter how old we are or how young, we can be there.

And all along the way we have the Torah that we make new in our generation. And we have blessings and prayers and Shabbat and holidays, which give us structure every day and every week, and remind us to be grateful and joyful, and rested, and teach us to be wise.

And that's how we're going to remember who we are. And that's how we're going to lead. And that's how we're going to enter into this coming day of atonement, as we turn ourselves toward our inner truth, toward our souls, toward our G-d.

That's why I love these holy days. All of this repentance and atonement and forgiveness is just about coming home to remember who we really are and how lucky we are to be able to do good with our lives.

Shana Tova. Gmar Chatima Tova.