

7 years ago at Temple B'nai Torah in Bellevue, WA, I became bat mitzvah. My Torah portion was Tzav, in the book of Leviticus and afterwards, my husband Ely gave me a gift.

Some of you here may remember that in 2000, WRJ had commissioned Neil Yerman to scribe a Torah for our organization.

Like many women here today, when I wrote my Hebrew letter in that Torah, at a Biennial just like this, it was a profound experience.

So Ely tracked Neil down in New York, and asked Neil to scribe my Torah portion from Tzav on a piece of parchment. Not only that -- Ely asked Neil to add at the very bottom of that piece of parchment, two Hebrew words from the Torah portion we chanted *today*.

He asked Neil to write - Lechi Lach – (the feminine form of Lech Lecha) -- meaning Go Forth - on that slip of parchment – because Ely knew that in the process of studying that year for my bat mitzvah, something had begun to awaken in me that was being called forth. Something important, something real, and something that would change our lives.

With these words that we chanted today, God speaks to Abraham for the first time. God says: Lech Lecha: “Go forth” sometimes translated as “Go to yourself.” The traditional understanding of this passage is that Abraham and Sarah are very special human beings whom Adonai plucks out of their lives for a unique mission.

God tells Abraham: Go. Leave your country, the place you were born, your parent’s house, and.....go to a land that I will show you.”

Essentially - leave everything that is familiar to you and journey into the unknown.

The Zohar, Judaism’s mystical text, looks at the verses that come right before Lech Lecha, and notices that in fact, Abraham and Sarah, were *already* “on the move.”

They possessed the internal desire to “Go to Canaan – had physically left their birthplaces, and *had* begun to journey. It was in *that* context, that God said to Abraham and Sarah: “Go forth.”

The Zohar comments – and listen to the intimate language it uses: “*Until he (Abraham) first aroused himself, this (Lech Lecha) is not written.*”

The Zohar suggests that human beings are in a love relationship with God.

It is our awakening that stimulates and arouses the Divine forces from above. This means that when we, as human beings, wake up, rouse ourselves to a possibility – perhaps a possibility that was there all the time that when we awaken, God also awakens, and joins us.

When WE wake up to what we are being called to do, when we get in touch with the journey and dreams that are encoded within our souls - God unites with us to make it happen.

It is incumbent on US to listen to the stirrings of our own heart, and to get in touch with “what am I being called to do, or to be” and to *begin* to move.

Sometimes what we are called to do is abrupt and clear – like God telling Abraham to Go Forth. And other times, we might respond to the still small voice within us that guides us to take beginning steps, perhaps uncertain where those steps will lead, but committed to listening all the same.

Today, I am so honored and awed to stand here before *you*, my friends, because many of you have been part of the steps that I have taken that (god willing) will lead to my ordination in 6 months and 10 days as a rabbi.

I never imagined that this was the destination that all the “yesses” I said over the last 18 years would lead me to, but here I am.

18 years ago, my husband and I had such a deep longing for community that we decided to move from Oakland to Seattle. We didn’t know a single soul outside of our real estate agent. Yet we believed that Seattle could be a place to put down roots. Our oldest child was about to enter kindergarten, and our youngest was 9 months old. We joined a synagogue; our primary motivation was to meet other Jewish families with young children.

I was like a lot of us who had come of age in the women’s movement, drawn to the *idea* of Sisterhood, although I knew nothing about what they did. (I still have my Sisterhood is Powerful button from the 1970’s in my jewelry drawer!)

When I saw that the Temple had a women’s group called “Sisterhood,” I was intrigued. I walked into my first Sisterhood meeting shortly after joining our new synagogue, and I knew I had found a loving home. The women were mostly my age at the time, warm and welcoming. I was quickly put in charge of something.

It was in Sisterhood that I learned how to make a Jewish home.

It was in Sisterhood that I learned about holidays I had never heard of like Tu B’shvat and Rosh Chodesh.

It was in Sisterhood that I learned to bake *challah*, *burekas* and *hamentaschen*. It was my Sisterhood friends who invited us into their home celebrations as if we were immediate family.

We had found the community we were searching for.

After several years on my synagogue's Sisterhood board, I was asked to be President. I said "yes." Then I was nominated to the WRJ National Board, and then to the Executive committee. I made friends from all over the country (like Lynn Magid Lazar, Sandy Gatlin and the other women on this bima).

Sisterhood also played a central role in my deepening interest in serious Jewish study. We studied Torah together, planned services and *Seders*.

My Sisterhood friends taught me the Torah blessings when I had my first *aliyah* to the Torah. Sisterhood women inspired me to learn Hebrew and to have a bat mitzvah.

I learned how to give Divrei Torah and had the honor of chanting Torah at the national Union of Reform Judaism convention, for WRJ's *aliyah*, in a congregation of 5000 Jews.

I began to immerse myself, consume myself (really) in Jewish books, learning and teaching.

The only way I can explain it is that at a profound level, I was answering a call, quenching a thirst, and responding very organically to what my soul desired.

My decision to apply to rabbinic school surprised no one (but me). (While our older son applied to college, I sat across the table from him filling out my own application to Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary.)

I felt that my acceptance to HUC was shared by every person in my own Sisterhood and by everyone on the national board who had been part of my journey.

I had the feeling that my entry into rabbinical school wasn't just for me – but for all the women who had told me that they had wanted to become a rabbi or a cantor or Jewish educator, but for many different reasons, had not been able to.

Isn't it amazing that after nearly a century of supporting the college, someone from our national leadership (one of "us") would be there as a student.

While I was serving my term on the WRJ Board, Cantor Sarah Sager came to a WRJ convention, just like this. She challenged the Women of Reform Judaism to create a Women's Torah Commentary that would add women's voices to our tradition.

There is no question that WRJ experienced Cantor Sager's challenge as a "Go Forth" moment. This kind of women's Torah Commentary, blending ancient and contemporary scholarship with a particular eye to issues of gender and female experience, had never been done before.

It was brave and huge and uncharted – *and* it was an idea whose time had come.

The WRJ community enthusiastically embraced this charge and said “Yes!” We will journey forth into this new territory. Many of you here were part of that journey.

We said YES and we began to move.

When I was in my 2nd year at HUC in Los Angeles, Dr. Tamara Eskenazi, the editor of the WTC, was supposed to be our Bible professor. But, she was on sabbatical to finish the Women’s Torah Commentary. Rabbi Lisa Edwards was our substitute for the semester. As part of our coursework, we randomly chose a portion to study in depth. My portion was Masei -- I wrote about the circumstances where a husband and father can cancel a woman’s vow.

Several months later, I received an email from Rabbi Edwards. She told me that SHE had been randomly assigned Masei for the Women’s Torah Commentary! She asked if I wanted to co-author the piece with her! I answered “yes,” with tears in my eyes, as the moment sunk in.

The way Lisa and I worked together was as important and instructive as the words that finally made it onto the page.

Lisa and I could have just as easily been making hamentaschen—The way we mixed and blended our ideas together mirrored the warm and supportive relationships that I have always had in Sisterhood.

This time we were making history.

When I was first selected to serve on the WRJ Board – it never occurred to me that I’d go to rabbinic school. When we voted to make the Women’s Torah commentary a reality, I never dreamed I’d be a contributor.

Each time I pick up the Women’s Torah Commentary, I am reminded of three simultaneous journeys of going forth to a “land that I will show you.”

The first is of our people, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, who have always said yes, and set forth.

The second journey is that of women finally arriving at a place where our collective wisdom and scholarship are being offered to the whole community.

The 3rd journey is my own “going forth” -- of picking up in the middle of my life to move, to learn, and to ultimately serve our people.

Three journeys braided together like a challah.

In 1993, Cantor Sarah Sager challenged the collective group of women of Reform Judaism. Today, I offer a more personal challenge.

I invite you to ask yourself: What is stirring in your own heart to which you want to awaken, and to which God can respond? What is calling to be brought forth in *your* life?

What dreams and possibilities have you perhaps set aside, what inner whisperings are you being called to pay attention to?

Do you desire to paint or sing?

Go back to school; begin a foundation; volunteer in a hospital?

Do you want to chant Torah, or learn Hebrew?

The size of the steps we take in the direction of our calling doesn't matter. What matters is that we take the time to pay attention to our soul's calling... that we begin to share with each other, our deepest hopes of what would fulfill us – or where we know, deep inside, that we must journey. And that we begin to move.

The Zohar teaches that when we wake up, God comes and opens doors. When we respond to the call to go forth, the forces align to guide our way.

Perhaps God speaks through those who love us, who encourage us to take risks, and who walk beside us as we journey into the unknown.

When God says to Abraham, Lech Lecha – Go Forth. God adds, "I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing."

The journey that Abraham and Sarah began led to the birth of the Jewish people.

This is our legacy – we are a people who say "yes," who journey, and who dare to fulfill the grandest dreams.

May you all be blessed as you pay attention to the murmurings of your own heart, and gather the courage to go forth into a land filled with blessings.

And so I say to you today, Lechi Lech, Go Forth.