

D'var Torah by Lisa Murphy
August 6, 2016 – Mount Zion Temple

Zipporah, today you make a commitment to live a Jewish life. I speak for both your father and myself when I say that we are very proud of you. We support your decision and your desire to find God and live your life by the tenets and ethics of Judaism.

It is fitting that you celebrate becoming Bat Mitzvah today. The beginning of today's Torah portion, teaches about promises. Numbers 30:4-6 reads:

“If a woman makes a vow to the Eternal or assumes an obligation while still in her youth, and her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all her vows shall stand and every self-imposed obligation shall stand. But if her father restrains her on the day he finds out, none of her vows or self-imposed obligations shall stand; and the Eternal will forgive her since her father restrained her.”

One thing to keep in mind as we explore this passage: Torah scholars in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* point out that the text talks about two different types of promises: vows which are promises to do something and obligations which are understood as promises to NOT do something.

We could spend time discussing how in the modern world this passage no longer applies as a woman's role in family and society is not the same as it was in biblical times. However, an interesting point is brought up in the *Women's Bible Commentary*. In this book,

Princeton Theological Seminary professor, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld notes that while we don't have direct evidence of the type of vows or obligations women would take, they surmise that they probably focused on children and fertility such as Hannah's vow in the Book of Samuel. Hannah vowed that if she were to have a son she would give him over or consecrate him to God. The commentary goes on to say “Whatever was typical, there is no

evidence for restriction on the goals women can hope to gain through their vows.” While a father or husband could put an end to the vows a woman would make he could not stop the aspirations of his daughter or wife. Zipporah, you and all young women cannot be held back in your goals and the promises you make to achieve them and the obligations you undertake to achieve those goals. This applies not just to Zipporah but also to all of us who read and find God in these sacred books. We all must recognize the ways in which the things we promise to do or the obligations we accept reflect our values and goals.

While I'm not a Jewish member of this community I have been affiliated with Mount Zion through my husband and children. I have been able to observe that as everyone in the community undertakes the obligations of Jewish life, they are supported not only by family, but by the Mount Zion community....

Picking up on this idea, Rabbi Rebecca Gutterman in her essay entitled “Broken and Made” applies it to life today. She says “With such words, in whatever form they may take, we promise that no matter what external realities bring, our internal intentions will stand. Vows hold out assurance that some things in life may indeed be forever, in a culture that would constantly have us discard, dispose of, and reinvent. When we elevate an inward hope to an outward promise, whether made to ourselves or to another person, the world can shift in ways both subtle and dramatic.”

Here Rabbi Gutterman reminds us that promises are no small thing. They are big, lasting commitments that we should not take lightly. Our promises are the outward sign of commitment to what we hope for, what we truly believe is important and value.

Today, Zipporah, as a bat mitzvah you are telling this community and all of the people gathered here what you value and what is important to you. That inward hope has become an outward promise. You are claiming the Jewish community as your own and that is no small thing. You are making a vow to uphold – as best you can- the teachings of Judaism. You are taking on the obligations of Jewish life. And we are all here because we support you in making this promise.

Building on that idea, Rabbi Jack Luxemburg in his reflection entitled “The Scope and Nature of Obligation” says, “Obligations define us. As individuals, there are some obligations we are free to assume, or not. As members of a community, our obligations are shared, regardless. And for us as Jews, some obligations are sacred and incumbent upon us for all time.”

While I’m not a Jewish member of this community I have been affiliated with Mount Zion through my husband and children. I have been able to observe that as everyone in the community undertakes the obligations of Jewish life, they are supported not only by family, but by the Mount Zion community and by the larger Jewish community as well. I have seen first hand how Mount Zion strives to become a community that will help its members understand the promises that are making and how to fulfill those promises. The people here support each other in fulfilling the obligations of Jewish life. This shouldn’t be seen a burden but as way to become a stronger community – especially to young people such as Zipporah and those gathered with her today.

As a famous woman or two once said, “Your word is your bond.” (oh what was her name...Michelle...Melania...something like that.) Zipporah, your words and actions today are your bond to live as a Jewish woman. This commitment defines who you are and how you are choosing to live your life. While your father may wish he had the same authority to control you that a father had in Biblical times, it wouldn’t matter. Not just because you have a bit of stubborn streak but because we both support you in these promises.