

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Devarim

One by one I am watching the familiar icons of my youth offer their final goodbyes. "And that's the way it was." These were the sincere words of one of the great news anchors in TV history. Walter Cronkite was an impartial reporter who really reported it, **as it was**. Once he even apologized for being emotional while reporting the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. He called it behavior unbecoming a true anchor. If Cronkite's said it, you knew it was as close to the truth as was humanly possible. Later, his work on behalf of The Interfaith Alliance exemplified his commitment to egalitarian reporting and to the task of building relationships across diverse religious backgrounds. Surely, he will be missed.

Cronkite will be missed all the more because of other tragic news this week. While it has never been a secret that New Jersey politics are replete with corruption, the arrest of over 130 people this week astounded even the arresting authorities. We are accustomed to seeing politicians embroiled in corruption, so while the numbers were eye catching, the subject was fairly mundane. Mundane, that is, until one gets the rest of the story. Amongst the many arrested were Rabbis. Rabbis are alleged to be involved in the international trafficking of human organs and the proliferation of forged name brand products. The receivables were being laundered through known Jewish charities. These Rabbis were not only running organizations, but also running congregations. At least one was arrested in the midst of the morning prayer service. And if this were not enough, statements already made by some seem to argue not that they are innocent, rather that they are indignant after having been caught. One is quoted as proudly stating that he has been selling organs for over 10 years, as a service to people, using the illegally gained money to teach Torah at fundamentalist houses of study. Politicians and clerics alike screamed that they were entrapped, that the police and FBI lied, and sadly, as in the case of these Rabbis, that they were entitled to these funds. With this news, the death of Walter Cronkite strikes deeper at the heart than just nostalgic pangs. This is a matter over which even he may not have been able to withhold scorn. These men, imbued with the apparent authority of Torah and public confidence, perverted the greatest sources of truth for their own selfish and corrupt gain.

How we live and the choices that we make write the pages of our biographies. How we are to be remembered should be ever present in our minds as we live each day. This week's portion begins Moses' farewell address to the people. He begins by retelling the story of the 40 year journey across the wilderness. Yes, his memory (as all memories tend to do) rewrites some of the story, but through it all, he tries to remind people that truth and righteousness in the moment of action are our ultimate obligations. He admonishes the people to make choices that bring them blessings and avoid the choices that would bring them curses. Where Israel falters in faith, it suffers. Where it succeeds along the way, the success results from the commitment of the people to care for each other and give honor to creation's own source -- God.

The haftarah this week is especially poignant. The haftarah is a text from the books of the prophets that somehow relates to the week's Torah text. This week, we read from the first chapter of Isaiah. The people are walking through all of the right motions – performing the necessary sacrifices and attending the necessary festival celebrations. They are doing all of this but with the wrong intentions. "I hate your new moons and festival days, they are a burden to me," says god through the mouth of the prophet. It is as if the prophet is speaking to these Rabbis and elected officials. Teaching Torah becomes blasphemy when financed through illegal and immoral fundraising. Carrying out the duties of office cannot be a defense for opportunistically lining one's personal pockets. These intentionally perpetrated injustices cause people to lose faith in our tradition, in our institutions, and even in the meaning of truth. That government and Torah can be so wrongly defaced serves not only to demean the wrong doer, but also

bring disillusionment to the rest of us. But the prophet goes on, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice and {all} will be redeemed by justice ... and righteousness." Moses also admonishes us, using the "promised land" as a metaphor for righteousness and blessings, "See, I place the land at your disposal. Go. Take possession of {it}." It is ours to choose - the blessing or the curse – for ourselves and for others. Torah teaches us "*u'v'khartah b'khayim l'ma'an ti'h'yeh* – therefore choose life, that you may flourish {live}." May we choose to restore faith in ourselves and others by the choices we make for our own lives. May our deeds be for the good, such that with reverence we can be remembered fondly as, "that's the way it was." Shabbat Shalom.