"If so, why do I exist?"
Parashat Toledot;
November 24, 2006

So we gathered together, yesterday, the majority of us, I believe, with family in friends, in an American tradition of hearth and home, of traditional food and familiar recipes, and woe betide the brave soul who alters the way it has been done forever, year after year from time immemorial, the daring chef who serves Cornish Hen instead of the traditional turkey, or slips something new and different into the stuffing or the pie.

We remembered, too, I hope, the meaning of the day, the eponymous holiday of giving thanks for what we have, and remembering those who are less fortunate in our midst.

In this regard I am reminded of a triple pun in Hebrew, which begins with a verse from Psalms so appropriate for this season: "*Hodu L'Adonai, Ki Tov!* Give thanks to God, for God is good! Or: give thanks for all that is good in our lives." But the Hebrew word *Hodu,* it turns out, slightly altered, echoes with other meanings as well. It means not only "thanks," but also… coincidentally… it is the word for "turkey." Biblical foreshadowing, if you will, of a manifest destiny, and an American milieu.

But we are not done yet. For just as in English, the word for this bird happens to also be the name of a country. Now, in English, the country which shares its name with the preferred poultry of the season… is Turkey. And I once heard that, in Spanish, too, there is at least a

similarity… the word for Turkey in Spanish is…? But in Hebrew, the country which shares its name with this bird is itself an accidental part of the story of Thanksgiving. Because the country called *Hodu* in Hebrew is none other than… India. The place which Columbus *thought* he had found, when he sailed across the sea.

And so mistaken meetings and familiar fowl are part of the tradition of this day. But its core, its essence, remains the act of appreciation. Giving thanks. And taking stock.

A few years ago I think I shared with you an experience I once had on a lonely road on a rainy night. I was listening to the radio, looking for a station, trying to keep away from overzealous Christian evangelizers or the enraged ranting of right-wing lunatics. I finally employed the scan feature of the radio and the stations whirled by, in rapid succession, until at last I heard the following three words: "agonizing existential desolation." That's it. Three words, and it was gone.

Agonizing existential desolation. Perhaps… perhaps that is what our mother Rebecca felt, in the midst of her pregnancy.

Twenty years she had waited to conceive. Twenty years. How do we know this? Because the Torah tells us. It is rare that we hear the ages of events in the Torah, other than birth and death. Very rare. In fact it happens, as we learned the other night from Dr. Marc Brettler, our visiting scholar, it happens only three times in the Torah, that we hear

about how old someone was when an event *other* than a birth or death takes place. We learn that Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sent by his father on a fateful task to find his brothers, a journey which would lead to our fraternal separation, our physical salvation, our enslavement, and our eventual escape and liberation. We learn that…

And here: we learn that Isaac was forty years old when he "took Rebecca as his wife." And, a few verses later, that he was sixty when the twins were born. Knowing, assuming, presuming that the idea of a few years to travel and see movies and get to know each other before having kids is… rather a modern notion… knowing that the very next verse after the announcement of their marriage is a description of their infertility… thus we know that it was twenty years that they were trying to have children. Trying. Hoping. Struggling. *Praying! "V'ye'tar Yitzchak L'Adonai lin'choach ishto;* And Isaac *pleaded* with Adonai on behalf of his wife."

And she conceives. And should be overjoyed. Twenty years of prayers answered at last!

"*V'yit'rot'z'zu ha'banim b'kirbah!* But then the children struggled in her womb." Is it bodily pain? Is it a pain in the soul? It is that "expecting" is not what she expected? Or the fact that her offspring were struggling with each other? Emotional or physical, it is a deep pain, of that we are sure. Because the next words are among the five most

powerful Hebrew words in the entire Torah. *"Im kein, lama zeh anochi?* If so, why do I exist?"

Facing such a moment in her life, wanting an explanation, an answer, Rebecca acts. *"Vateilech lidrosh et Adonai.* She went *lidrosh,* to ask, to inquire, to seek, to *demand* an explanation from God."

We are made of different stuff, we human beings. Some of us are happy all the time, some are always complaining; some are willing to give the Cornish Hen a try and some cannot abide change. We are different in personality and temperament, orientation and inclination.

And yet, I believe, we all face this moment, perhaps, indeed, even more than once in our lives. *Im kein, lama zeh anochi?* If so, why do I exist? Not just, as Rebecca might have meant on the surface, is this really worth it? But deeper: why are we here? What is the purpose of our life?

We face this moment alone, in the darkest struggles and the the deepest nights of our lives. And, perhaps, we face this moment as a people, with a kind of collective consciousness, a moment when purpose and destiny and "reason to exist" come crashing forward, from deep background, to the center of our awareness.

The day comes for many of us when we look into the mirror and have a moment of shock, as the face which stares back at us belongs to the image we have in our minds… of our mother, of our father. Even those of us who are adopted know when a twitch of the brow, an expression on our face, a movement of our hands echoes those of the parents who raise us.

But what of the moment of equal shock… when the face which stares back at you… simply does not look like you?

We know what it is like to function at our best, to operate in a way which feels like who we really are. And we all, I believe, know what it is like to not be centered, to struggle and flail around, to fail to be our best, to be caught in the throes of the bitter angels of our nature, to not be ourselves.

And somewhere in the gap, between the best and worst of our selves, is our own inner compass, our own sense of standards and purpose and expectation of ourselves. Somewhere inside is the answer to: if so, why do we exist?

Are we put on this world for a single purpose? No, I think it is more than that. But there are purposes in our lives. And there are puzzles for us to solve: pieces for us to find, and pieces we hold in trust for others. Only you know the essence of yourself, what you are “meant”

for, what you can achieve, what you can take in, and what you can give back. What makes you the inner Michael, the inner X, the inner Y.?

As for a person, so, too, for a people.

What is it that makes us who we are, in regards to the groups to which we belong, the collectives of which we are a part. As Americans? As Jews? As any of the groups with which we identify? An accident of birth? Or, at some point along the way, is there an essence we wish to emulate, a core that we affirm, an amorphous affirmation of "us" which brings meaning and definition to our lives?

What makes a Jew a Jew? This is one of the most complicated questions one can ask of any religious identity – more complicated, for a variety of reasons, than the question, for example, of what makes a Christian a Christian or what makes a Muslim a Muslim, although those are hard questions as well. Those of you who have studies with me in other settings know that my core teaching about our identity is that Judaism is a confluence of faith and folk, an intersection of spirituality and community, a union of belief and culture, or even peoplehood. The answer to what makes a Jew a Jew is tackled in classrooms and in homes, across a lifetime and a generation, over time and across continents. In fact the only really effective answer to a closely related question, as to whether what we are doing as Jews is Jewishly authentic, may be an answer so slippery as to be out of reach – to know if what we

are doing is Jewishly authentic, we may need to consult our grandparents, but the answer will really come… from our grandchildren, and their grandchildren. Time will tell. We do the best we can, and cannot really be sure.

But something came up in our Religious School this year which I want to share with you.

Every year, towards the beginning of the school year, we hold "Back to School." On that Sunday morning, in each session of the school, the parents come together in the Sanctuary for a discussion with our Director of Education and with me. This year JoHanna Potts reintroduced a concept from around a decade ago: the idea of a covenant of education, of a mutual set of expectations and understandings as to what a Jewish religious school can and needs to provide for a proper Jewish education to take place – and, in reciprocal fashion, what families need to provide for a healthy Jewish identity to grow and thrive.

Evidently we touched some hot-button items this year. The discussion in both sessions was heated, animated, controversial but, I believe, constructively engaged. JoHanna handled the discussion particularly well… although I do recall stepping in to the middle at one point and reminding everyone that there were, actually, Jewish Republicans in the world… and in the congregation… and that we need to create a climate of comfort for a wide-range of people.

But the question of what, at its core, is "Jewish" – or, to put is another way, what is Jewish at its "core" – proved to be quite contentious. The phrase "Jewish ethics" caused particular discomfort.

I do understand why. After all, how many times have we done something nice, and a friend has responded that it was "mighty Christian of us," thus equating general morality with a particular manifestation of creed. True story: a church in the deep South had a horrible fire, and the synagogue across the street provided meeting space for them, until such a time as the church could be rebuilt. So the day of the dedication of the new Church rolls around, and, from their pulpit, comes the heart-felt expression of gratitude and appreciation. Sure enough, and in a way which was neither tongue-in-cheek nor conscious of the irony of their words, they thanked the members of the synagogue for being "such good Christians."

Having heard that kind of remark, any of us should want to be sensitive to the implication of our words. If a child does something kind, we should be careful in what we convey when we say "Oh, that was the Jewish thing to do."

And yet… we can go too far… in our efforts to be politically correct. Of course there is a difference between general ethics and being a good person and being Jewish… nor do we assert, for example, God forbid, that "ethics" is confined to any one group of people.

But there *is* such a thing…as Jewish ethics. And our job, here, is not to teach general ethics served with bagels, but *Jewish ethics.* There is a difference in how Jews and other religious view human nature, the question of whether human beings are born flawed or born neutral. While we are not unanimous in our beliefs – indeed, we are notoriously diverse in our views about just about everything; you've heard the phrase, of course: two Jews, three opinions – nevertheless on any particular topic there is a general Jewish sense of approaches to moral questions such as capital punishment, the beginning of life, questions to ask about the end of life, sexuality and intimacy, material success and spiritual fulfillment. If there is not a single Jewish view nevertheless there are Jewish views, and in the sum and total of it all there is that which is *Jewish* about an approach to life, the universe, and everything.

Im kein, lama zeh anochi? **If so, why do I exist?**

We are here for a reason.

For each one of us, and for each of the nebulous nexus of affiliations and associations in our lives, there is a higher calling of purpose and presence and power.

Let us remember, this Thanksgiving weekend, to take stock of our lives. To give thanks for what we have. And to live up to who we are… in all the arenas of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.