

**Jen Taylor Friedman (hatam\_soferet)@ 2008-12-14**

So last weekend I was in Berkeley. There were persimmons on trees, and a cute bunny in the garden next door going hoppity-hop!

Basically, I was there to be Inspirational. Jewish Milestones is a group that, hm, let's say, it recognises that quite a lot of people want to be Jewish off their own bats and don't want to join a shul so that the rabbi can be Jewish for them. Further, it recognises that sometimes people need a bit of help with that cos not everyone has a full set of Jewish Skillz. So it helps Being-Jews find Action-Jews and make Judaism, and to that end, it also has a stock of Jewish Stuff - which didn't include a Torah, which is a bit of a handicap when e.g. doing services.

Then it got a Torah, and that is rather a big deal, so there was a Hooray-We-Have-A-Torah event, and I got to play the role of Yay-Torahs-Are-Super.

So you can read about that in this nice newspaper article, here.

I also...

- \* got to spend time with the Jewish Milestones office people doing Here Is How To Look After Your Torah, which not enough people invest time in learning so it was really nice to be able to teach that properly for once.

- \* stayed with a super-nice family

- \* visited Netivot Shalom on Shabbat and gave over a form of this dvar torah, which judging by reaction people seemed to enjoy, and they had the. most. awesome. kiddush after, and the rabbi is a sweetheart

- \* got to see *[info]darcydodo yay!*

- \* went to Walnut Creek to do Hebrew school...I'd had the impression that the first class was going to be 20 kids; it turned out to be 40, which was a bit more of a challenge. I'm still learning how to engage and keep engaged a roomful of sixth-graders in Hebrew school.

- \* The second group was a girls' Rosh Chodesh group; they'd been meeting once a month for the past year, and I suppose I'm a role-model, or something, so they were meeting again with me there even though it wasn't Rosh Chodesh. Mostly I was really fascinated to learn from them - this is a Reform place, entirely egalitarian, so what do they get out of having a girls-only group? So the sorts of things I shared were mostly with that in mind. It was very interesting, picking up bits here and there, but mostly I was struck by what a jolly nice group they were.

- \* Then event, as per newspaper link above; I had a lot of fun talking about Ur New Torah, Let Me Show You It. And afterwards I did the thing where I sit and write people's Hebrew names, which I love doing because it's so easy (compared to some of the other stuff I do) and gives people so much pleasure.

Talking with the Milestones staff about what they do and the general Berkeley Jewish Scene, was both really nice and really interesting.

There's a story about Rabbi Meir, who in addition to being a sage, was also a scribe. He came to a little community one Purim, and they didn't have a Megillah, so he sat down and wrote them one so they could have a Megillah reading. Strikes me the Milestones peeps are like that.

**Jen Taylor Friedman (hatam\_soferet) wrote, @ 2008-12-17 19:37:00**

### **Torahs in airports, part 1**

Since I was posting at Jewschool anyway...

Torahs are supposed to be transported with the absolute maximum of utter respect, as befits something that symbolises the essence of a religion.

So, you're delivering a Torah. You're taking it as cabin baggage, since checked isn't very nice. There's only the one of you, since it's not economically feasible for a companion to come with you. You're waiting in the concourse and you need to use the bathroom. What do you do?

Here are the values in play: In an airport, checked baggage doesn't get treated especially well, and if you leave anything unattended, it is liable to be stolen or removed and exploded (and the airport will be evacuated and everyone's flights will be disrupted). Also, a Torah has to be treated with respect in transit. Specifically, it is Very Not Okay to take a Torah into the bathroom, even if it is wrapped up. You may also not treat it like any old package, unless there are safety reasons such as being afraid of thieves.

Posed with the question, one kid in Berkeley decided, "You find a Jew and ask them to look after it..."

Asked if a Jew was necessary, kid said no, her second choice would be a security person, but a Jew would be better.

I think that's a splendid answer. It meets all the requirements of the situation, and adds the nuance that makes it a human response and not a mathematical deduction.

Interestingly, that highlights something about the basic process of halakhic decision-making. The scales are weighted by the baggage you bring with you - denominational preference, cultural inclinations, political implications, and so on. Above, I said: here are the values we need to weigh up (including acceptance of previous decisions, note), and here is the situation we need to work them into. Halakhic decision-making entails balancing all the values against the situation and working out a solution which has the maximally advantageous balance - and it turns out the best answer comes with reference to a value I didn't even list. That is, when listing the values to be considered, it's dashed hard to make sure you've got all of them - and even then, finding the answer isn't necessarily just a matter of weighing up all the components.

If it doesn't fit with people's instinct - that is, the sense, in the low levels of consciousness, that something does or does not harmonise with the set of values a person holds, and holds deeply enough that they are both fundamental to their being and almost past articulation - something's wrong. Some part of the puzzle is missing.

This is why halakha is more interesting than mathematics. It's not just about taking systemic data and processes and combining them consistently, it's also about incorporating the human element, which is considerably more complicated and subtle, and often appears to defy logic. Accommodating this and nonetheless managing to maintain a reasonably functional and consistent system is the challenge of formalistic Judaism, and a challenge which changes as often as the people who are part of it. It's not as calming as mathematics, but it's why I'm not a professional mathematician.