I am humbled to follow Deborah and Susan, who gave such inspirational teachings. I’d like to thank Rabbi Bauer for his help.

This week’s Torah portion, Va’eiara, is part of Exodus, Chapters 6:2 - 9:35. The Israelites are slaves in Egypt and Moses is bargaining unsuccessfully with Pharaoh to “let my people go.” This chapter includes seven of the ten plagues.

There will be three more plagues ending with the death of every Egyptian firstborn son, after which the Israelites flee, cross the Red Sea, receive the Torah at Sinai, wander in the desert for 40 years, and finally enter the land of Israel.

I learned with Rabbi Bauer that the Hebrew word for desert, “midbar,” shares a root with the word for speech, “dabar.” So were the Israelites in the desert wandering or were they learning how to speak to each other? After 400 years of enslavement and also some assimilation into Egyptian culture, our tribe may have needed time to recreate its identity, language, culture and practices.
It is human nature to see the world through our own personal histories, and we started this year by sharing ours. There were commonalities as well as differences, amplified by our varied skill sets, experiences, expectations, and temperaments. As we learn to speak to one another and unify our voices, I want to focus on the role of empathy, one of our core values.

Most of us identified empathy as a top 3 core value in the Slingshot exercise last meeting and applied it very comfortably in our grant reviews. Its cousins, sympathy and pity, both can have positive consequences but rarely create the kind of shared – even holy – connection that is “mutually transforming,” in the words of philosopher Martin Buber. Language is telling: we pity someone, have sympathy for someone, but empathize with someone.

Today I want to suggest that empathy is just as important to share with each other as with our grantees. Whether in compliment or critique, it lets us know we are speaking the same language, and are being heard. Empathy for each other will be essential in building an environment that feels safe enough for our group to try new things and grow. Unlike its easy application to our grant work, though, this may take a commitment to self-awareness of our own personal narratives.

As an example, I’m pretty sure that I thanked you, Erica and Joy, for a great
Slingshot experience, because I judged the exercise a success (however sympathetically) rather than thinking about what it might have been like for each of you – relatively new to our community, juggling young children and multiple responsibilities – asking us to try something unfamiliar: frequently an uncomfortable experience, with no guarantee of success. I often leap to assess outcomes as part of a personal family narrative that prizes achievement against generational scars from immigration and the Great Depression. This may have helped me get into graduate school, but here I missed a golden opportunity to say, “I’m on the same team.”

So I want to thank you both again, this time with a fuller appreciation for your courage in helping us try something new. I’d like to be a more thoughtful and supportive partner.

Empathy is central to the way we traditionally experience Exodus: we tell the Passover story as *OUR* story, when *WE* were in Egypt, when *I* was a slave. Learning to speak together is an essential part of our story: the Israelites enter the Land of Israel without Moses leading the way. Only once we have learned to talk to each other can we go forth as a people.

My aspiration for our group is that we can create a culture of empathy that allows us to grow. I hope we can manifest empathy by speaking to each other with a generosity of spirit that is as profound as the empathy we show
our grantees.