

Late October 2010

Dear friends,

This is a semi-secular follow up to my early October letter so if you haven't read it yet you might want to dig it out of your computer files - or not. For the "not" group, here's a quick reminder. The last letter was basically my take on the Torah portion Lech Lecha (get up and go) when God directly tells Abraham to leave his comfort zone for the unknown. I quickly wandered on to the question as to why the patriarchs and matriarchs (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel), as opposed to Moses, get so much more ink in our liturgy. Hold on to the distinction - liturgy is the material we use for prayer - not what is in the Bible. After all, it is Moses who is really the hero of our story. I know one supposed justification is that we (the collective ancient we) made a choice long ago to downplay Moses (particularly at Passover) to avoid him being deified. I get it. I just don't find it spiritually satisfying. Moses models leadership, commitment to the One, acceptance of the concept of consequences, demonstrates an active conscience and is most often called Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our teacher.

So, I was talking to my favorite clergyperson, my husband Michael, to get his progressive Christian take on the issue and the resultant indignation I was feeling on behalf of Moses. He sort of looked quizzical for a moment and said that it made perfect sense to him since we (the Jewish half of his family) are all about community, about family, about peoplehood. (this is just one of many "aha" moments Michael has gifted to me over the years) Moses, in our story, is a very isolated man. From my new perspective of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the repetitions focus our spiritual energy on our earliest "begats" as monotheists (not as Jews - this was pre-Sinai). If we were simply declaring a new way of being religious, we would need no begats. If we were proselytizers, focused solely on our "message" we wouldn't need the Avot V'Imot - the fathers and mothers. However, from the earliest days of our ancestors, we have had the interconnection of peoplehood and God/the Other.

I'm not a huge proponent of hanging the future of Judaism on peoplehood. As more and more of us settle comfortably in the larger world, with Jewish, non-Jewish or secular partners and friends, the differences between "us" and "them" that I grew up with are quickly disappearing. Watching my husband order kishke at a local deli is enough to tell me the lines drawn between us/them are porous already.

However, our peoplehood has often been determined by others during the many times Jews around the world have faced extinction. We were identified, not for what we believed, but for being part of the "begats." The world declared us a people, connected through ancient blood, no matter what we believed or how we behaved. A Moroccan or a Polish Jew, no matter how many generations their families had lived in Morocco or Poland, were Jews through other eyes first. The reality is the only thing they actually had in common was Torah and prayer. For many hundreds of years that has been our story.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism called us an "evolving religious civilization". For me, the word that keeps me in community is "evolving" for that is why I find Judaism so fascinating and get so frustrated when it is interpreted as fixed. For thousands of years we settled all over the world. We married and learned new languages. We were exposed to the "other" and sometimes became the other. Our inability to communicate across the globe or have a definitive hierarchy allowed Judaism to change shape in different countries. It evolved depending on where it settled. The world of the Sephardim, in lands like Spain, North Africa, or the Middle East was dramatically different then the world of the Ashkenazi, the Jews of Eastern Europe, of Germany, of

England. They spoke Hebrew differently and their rules of kashrut reflected where they lived as much as the Talmudic lessons they had learned. The Chasidim of Eastern Europe stretched Judaism even more to make it more human - by teaching through charming story as well as through Torah. The mystics changed some of us and gave us all different ways to pray, sing and dance. We were told that Jews all over the world prayed as we did and thought as we did and we were all part of the people Israel. We were all begats - but we were no longer alike.

So despite the number of us who are comfortable living as "begats" there are also a number of us questioning our teachers, even Moshe Rabbenu. We are asking questions about living modern, liberated lives that connect with God, however that power is defined. We also want to know the responsibilities and gifts that our religious lives bring to us. People say you don't have to believe in God to be Jewish - you just need to feel part of the peoplehood. I struggle with that, since our liturgy is full of praise to God and each time we say "Amen" we are saying that the prayer accurately reflects our feelings. I'm still hanging with the monotheists.

So I now see a contemporary reason to honor our ancestors because, using a common image, we have stood on their shoulders for a long time. However, we also need to know that as a people we have moved beyond the begats while still honoring them, beyond the basic teachings that we received from Moses while still understanding the truths he had to share.. We had to. Life, history, family - all demanded changes and they happened. It can happen again. That doesn't stop us from honoring our roots. That doesn't stop us from remembering that monotheism came first and without it Moses would have not encountered the burning bush and the Ten Commandments would not have been our gift.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel all took leaps of faith - moving from many gods to One. Moses took a leap of responsibility as well as faith - accepting the weight of leadership. What are we going to do? Where is our leap? Where is our leadership? The first step is always the hardest, and I will be more comfortable honoring our ancestors who took that leap, but more anxious to see what comes next for those of us "begat" somehow into the Jewish people.

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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