

This Week In Torah *Terumah*

My cousin, Stephen, is part of a group in Boca of retired Jews who gather to discuss Jewish topics on a monthly basis. At first—I viewed it as a version of the website: “Old Jews Telling Jokes” but with a different twist—it is intellectual, cerebral and evocative by design. But there was something about next month’s topic that just caught me-- In March, these 10 “old” Jews will be discussing: “Can Jewish survival be attributed to the richness of our past; learning, celebrating, calendar, Torah? OR, is our survival assured through antisemitism?”

Let us acknowledge the reality of antisemitism. It exists currently, but it is nowhere as awful as what Jews thru-out history have endured: discrimination, pogroms, attacks, quotas, beatings, remarks filled with vile and hatred, and attempts of near genocide. Yes, Jews have survived and even thrived as a result. It is a sociological proof of Isaac Newton’s Third Law of Motion—“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” In each historical moment when Jewish annihilation was the goal, Jews bound together to push back—keeping the sanctity of Judaism as well as ourselves alive.

But if we as a faith/people are going to continue beyond this century, we must be more than a counter-force to hatred. Our Reform Jewish movement’s leader, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, pointed out the next generation of Jews may not be inclined to come to synagogue under a tag-line of: “come and survive with us...” Relevance, meaning, and purpose must be addressed for Judaism to be presented in people’s lives. We must move beyond “Jewish living,” filled with doing rituals and practices without inherent meaning beyond what we learned in Religious School; rather we need to empower Jews to live Jewishly with principles, ethics, and direction for a righteous sense of being. Our people’s survival should be personal life choices; survival is a consequence of living Jewishly and not its purpose. Jewish communal life will endure if Jews individually make it so.

Enter this week’s *parasha* with its famous line: “Build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.” In a post-Temple era, the Rabbis of the Talmud focused on creating a “*mikdash me’at*”—a small sanctuary within. Repeat several times, interactions within

the home create that sacred presence. Maimonides internalized the practice by noting in his commentary *Shemonah Perakim* that each person must construct this within their own soul. The Hasidic sages echoed this when they encouraged people to create a *dira*, a space, where God can dwell within us. Our friend, Bruce Feldman, shared a teaching on last week's *sedra* in which the words *Na'aseh v'n'shmah* meant that everyone did the *mitzvot*, but each person had heard them as if they were given to just them. Communal doing is met with individual ownership.

What makes for Jewish survival? In a phrase, ownership of Jewish experiences.

- *Mitzvot* cannot be done under the auspices of their good deeds--- no, it is about the presence of God in our lives that gives them their validity. This is not like a retelling of that famous Mae West quote: "Goodness has nothing to do with it." [She was an actress in '30s]—goodness is the result of doing God's commands! *Mitzvot* brings God into the equation on a regular basis.
- Sacred times have been met with surface performance of rituals. We joke that holidays can be summarized by the phrase: "They came to get us, we won, now let's eat." There is truth there but scratch beneath the surface and we can encounter methodology for Jewish continuity:
 - Hanukkah reminds us of the precarious status of Jews when they live in a greater empire. Autonomy becomes limited and assimilation becomes a vehicle for financial success and greater status in a larger arena. But when occupiers seek to strip us of our religious identity, physically degrade our ancestors, and greed for wealth/power is a symbol of occupation— it is assimilation run-amok! [A powerful and cautionary message for American Jewry in the 21st century]
 - Purim as a holiday is more than a tale of survival. It is a cautionary tale that we cannot remain in a land that is not ours. Antisemitism exists— there are Hamans out there who are threatened by our presence and whose hatred is manifest through annihilation. In a way, Purim teaches that while the Persians sacked the Babylonians and permitted the Jews to return thus ending the First Exile, we cannot be complacent in a foreign

land. There is a subtle reminder that we cannot truly integrate into societies symbolized by Esther's marriage and Mordechai being elevated on a horse led by Haman. Hatred against us exists. [Another powerful and cautionary message for American Jewry in the 21st century]

- Then there is Passover, which talks about God's presence and omnipotence as a factor of deliverance, and which gives us the desert experience to be the seed of theological resistance to prevent assimilation. It also instills the importance of nationhood. This week's *parasha* speaks of the symbols of that—the ark and *mishkan* which will house God's sacred words. [A powerful and inspiring message for American Jewry in the 21st century]
- *Shabbat* should be personally reclaimed as the paradigm of personal religious expression. It is not a day-off, but the day-on to embrace the reality of God's creation. It is a chance to ascend from the mundane and embrace the sanctity of being. This time, even for the most secular among us, builds awareness for the awesomeness of the Jewish perspective and our bond with God.

Yet, those messages may not resonate with American Jews who have known full legal acceptance. Never have a Jewish people been so secure in their environment than we are currently. As a result, the obvious counter-force to antisemitism is not an incentive for us. Rather, it should be found in the joys of celebrating the holidays. It should be found in learning then applying those sacred values into the daily living of our lives. Holidays remind us of the power of survival, a gift that we should never take for granted. But experiencing them should invigorate the soul and compel us to seek positive ways of expressing the reclaimed Jewish soul within each of us. And here we stand as Liberal Jews – Reform/Conservative/Reconstructionist. We should harken the words of Zionist leader Ahad Ha'am who wrote: "Learning! Learning! Learning! That is the key to Jewish survival." We should place the responsibility for Jewish continuity not on government/society/community but on the individual to foster the energy and connection to fulfill the ultimate challenge of this week's Torah portion: "build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them."

Hmmmm... I should send this to my cousin Stephen before his meeting!