

## **BLACKFEET SERMON – ROSH HASHANA 5773**

**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

In the beginning all the world was water. One day Old Man...decided to find out what might lie beneath the water. He sent animals to dive below the surface... Old Man sent muskrat diving into the depths. Muskrat remained under water so long Old Man began to fear that he had drowned. At last muskrat rose slowly to the surface, holding between his paws a little ball of mud. Old Man took this small lump of mud and blew upon it. The mud began to swell. It continued to grow larger and larger until it became the whole earth.

Then Napi, the Old Man, traveled about over the earth piling up rocks to make mountains, gouging out beds of rivers and lakes and filling them with water. He covered the plains with grass. He made roots and berries grow on the grasslands and timber in the mountains and river valleys. He made all the animals and the birds. One day Old Man decided that he would make a woman and a son. So he formed them both of clay, the woman, [called] Old Woman, and the child, her son...Together Old Man and Old Woman designed the people and determined how they should live...Old Man said, "Let the people have eyes and mouths in their faces, and let them be straight up and down." But Old Woman added, 'Yes, let them have eyes and mouths; but they shall be set crosswise in their faces.'" Old Man said, "Let the people have ten fingers on each hand." "No," declared Old Woman, "ten fingers are too many. They will be in the way. Let them have four fingers and a thumb on each hand." So the people were made.

But Old Man and Old Woman could not agree on one important point. Should the people live forever, or should they die? Finally...the Old Woman said, "I will throw this rock. If it floats, the people will die for four days. If it sinks, they will die forever." She threw the rock into the water, and it sank to the bottom. Then they agreed that it was better that way. If people lived forever they would never feel sorry for one another.

The first people were hungry and naked, and they did not know how to do anything for themselves. Old Man showed them the roots and berries and said "You can eat these." Then he pointed to certain trees, "When the bark of these trees is young and tender, it is good. Then you can peel it off and eat it." Then Old Man showed them...how to make wooden bows and stone-headed arrows, how to use weapons, traps, and deadfalls to kill buffalo and the smaller animals for food, and how to dress animal skins for warm clothing.

After Old Man had taught the people all these things...he was so tired that he lay down on a hill. [When] he awoke from his sleep...he gazed over the country, [and] he was greatly pleased by it. His work of creation completed, Old Man climbed a high mountain and disappeared...Even today some people think that...when he comes back he will bring with him the buffalo which they believe the white men have hidden. Others remember that before he left them he said that when he returned ...they would be living in a different world from that which he had created for them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Combined story from John C. Ewers *The Blackfeet: Raiders of the Northwest Plains*, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press (1958), pp. 3-4, and "Blackfeet Creation Tale" from <http://www.montana.edu/wwwbcc/legend.html>.

This story is the Blackfeet Indian Creation myth. As some of you know, I spent time this summer volunteering on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana with my 17-year-old nephew, learning a little about the Blackfeet culture. Creation is what Rosh Hashana is all about. On Rosh Hashana, we celebrate the creation of the world. Indeed, one of the Torah readings for Rosh Hashana is the beginning of Genesis when God makes order out of chaos bringing to life our planet and human beings. It struck me that the Blackfeet Creation story has interesting parallels to our own.

Indeed, in both stories, the Creator fashions a world of beauty and harmony in a step by step process. Once the material world is completed, human beings are formed out of the very essence of the earth. The Creator's breath instills life and the Creator's word animates the process. The Creator is pleased with Creation in both cases, and rests when it is complete. Though our story does not feature an Old Woman with whom the Creator consults, there are scholars who believe that when God says: "Let us create human beings in our image," the "us" refers to a female consort who was, at one time, in the original tale. In both stories, human beings must learn to fend for themselves with the guidance of the Creator.

Both the Blackfeet and the Jewish community share another commonality: a history of persecution and decimation, and an amazing ability to survive. And now the Blackfeet as well as the liberal branches of Judaism, face an uncertain future, as the younger generation drifts away. The question both communities face is how to convince those who come after us that the culture and the traditions are

worth preserving, that they offer an anchor of strength, stability and meaning at a time when so much in our society leaves us confused, alienated and afraid. The leadership of the Reform movement affirms: “We passionately believe that a Reform Jewish life adds depth, direction and substance to the lives of those who otherwise risk wandering in a material wasteland. Standing firmly in an authentic tradition, we respond to a world in need of hope by raising our moral sights instead of accepting ethical chaos. Reform Judaism teaches us to do what is just and right, based on our ancient teachings and our modern insights.”

Members of the Blackfeet Tribe are also reaching back to their tradition as a way to provide firmer grounding for the next generation. They are endeavoring to preserve and teach their language, culture and rituals so that they can survive and emerge as a vibrant, hopeful and self-sufficient community once again.

Indeed, the Blackfeet were once a proud, fierce people, expert horsemen, archers, riflemen and buffalo hunters.



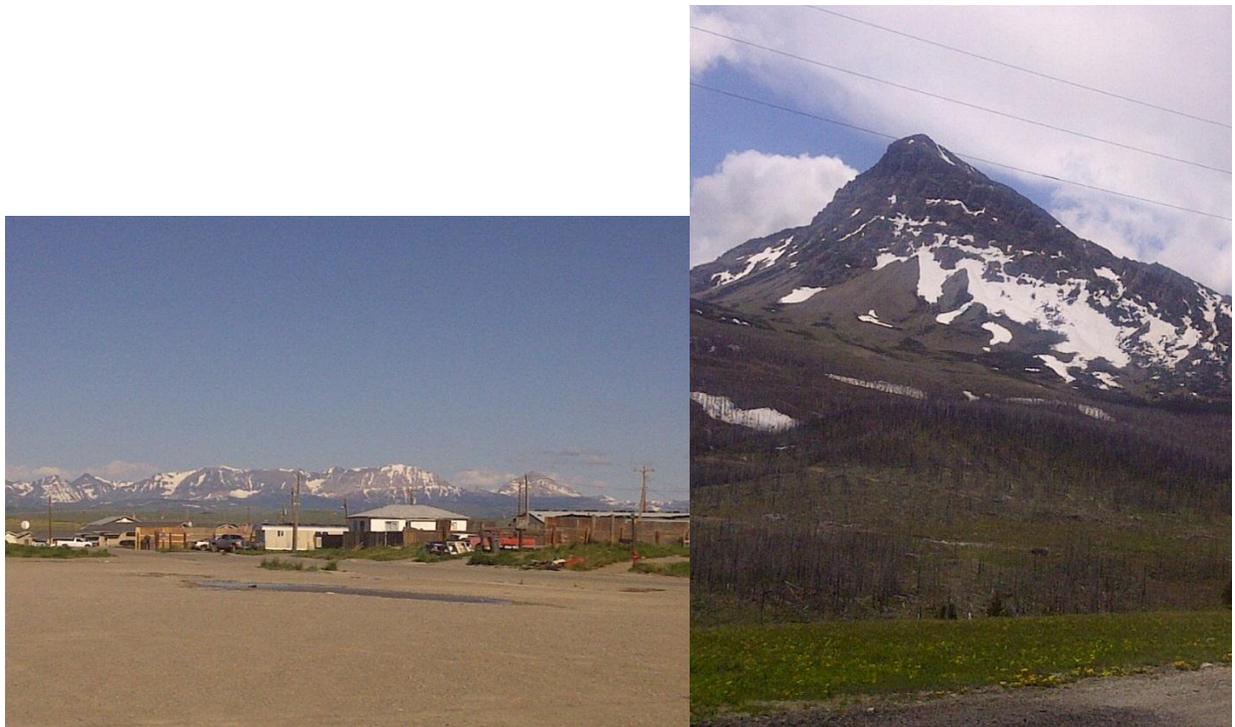
The arrival of the white man and the US government in the mid-19th century, brought small pox, the depletion of their buffalo herds, and a massacre. As a result, the Blackfeet were reduced in number, pride, and self-reliance, so that today, they are a highly impoverished tribe with major drug and alcohol problems.



There are now about 16,500 registered members of the Blackfeet Nation, the largest tribe in Montana. About half of them live on the 1.5 million acre Reservation which is located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Northwestern Montana.



The Town of Browning, where we volunteered, is 13 miles east of what the Blackfeet call the “Backbone of the World,” the magnificent Rockies.



Unemployment on the Reservation is around 75 percent. Unfortunately, many Blackfeet have had their sense of worth and their will power knocked out of them by years of efforts to suppress their way of life and by the fact that the Reservation does not offer many opportunities for gainful employment.

I came with a group from Global Volunteers to the city of Browning to do a variety of things - weed and plant vegetable gardens, work in the Community College library, read to children at the Boys and Girls Club, serve the elderly, and scrub floors, mow, and paint at a variety of Head Start Centers.



I was also able to visit with quite a number of folks because I spent a morning traveling with Sean, a Blackfeet, to help him deliver 80 Meals on Wheels. Most of the Browning residents live in mobile homes, often three generations in a fairly small space.



As we arrived with the food, the older folks were very pleasant. Some of the folks from the younger generation were less animated. Clearly, because of the high rate of unemployment, many of these people are hanging around without much to do. At noontime, some of the children were just waking up. According to Sean, they had spent the night playing video games. Dogs were everywhere, though they were, amazingly non-aggressive. Sean knew all the old folks by name and was very kind to them.



Many of the Blackfeet were very open with us and were eager to share their stories. I was impressed with how committed several of them were to offering their children and their community a better life than the ones they had led. I rolled cutlery in paper napkins Eagle Shield, a senior care center, with Shirley, a 75 year-old Indian, who was raised by her grandparents.



Shirley divorced her husband because he drank, and she raised her two kids on her own, working two jobs. "I never took nothing," she said, meaning handouts or welfare. She encouraged her children to make something of themselves. Both went to college. Her daughter Leah teaches Blackfeet language and history at the community college in Browning, and is working on her PHD online. Her son lives in Bozeman and works as a carpenter and an electrician. Shirley has 6 grandchildren, ages 4 to 21. The oldest is a senior in college.

One of the highlights of the trip was participating in a sweat lodge, many of which are not open to non-Indians because it is a religious ceremony. A sweat lodge is a low, relatively small, round tent, in which some 25 people sit in concentric circles. Rocks are heated until they are glowing red, then placed in the middle of the lodge. Sage and sweet grass are sprinkled on the rocks and water sprayed over them. The tent is pitch black inside. Folks chant prayers and ask for healing from the Creator, as well as from the spirit of the eagle and the bear. The idea behind the sweat lodge is that we have to suffer in order for the Creator to have pity on us and grant our wish. (At this explanation, my thought was: Haven't these people suffered enough?) One spends 4-5 hours in the lodge, with short breaks every 20

minutes or so in order to cool off and get a drink of water. At the end of the ceremony, one is supposed to feel purified and reborn. It is quite an amazing experience, and it inspired me to draw some additional parallels to the Jewish tradition.

First of all, the men and women sit on separate sides of the lodge, just like in Orthodox shuls. Secondly, the chanting reminded me of the niggunim - wordless melodies - we use in synagogues. Thirdly, the idea of emerging purified and reborn reminded me of the mikvah - the ritual bath we use for purification and rebirth prior to big occasions. Beyond the parallels to the sweat lodge, the Blackfeet are very tied to their land, just as we are to Israel, which is why so many either never leave the Reservation or come back after they've lived elsewhere. The Blackfeet also have had their religion, language and culture suppressed, yet they secretly maintained their traditions, just like the conversos -- those Jews living under the Inquisition who converted to Catholicism -- and like many in Eastern Europe who, under both the Nazis and the Communists, were forbidden from being openly Jewish.

Now the Blackfeet traditions have reemerged, though the older generation fears the younger generation's lack of interest in them - as we do. One of the religious traditions that has been maintained is that of the sun dance. It was outlawed from 1904 until 1978. The ceremony is held around the time of the summer solstice. Along the same idea that one must suffer in exchange for being granted a wish, sun dancers prepare themselves by fasting and sitting in a sweat lodge for 4 days. Then, a medicine lodge constructed of poles and rafters radiating from a

central pole is constructed. Here is a description of the ritual: "Each one of the young men presented himself to a medicine-man, who took between his thumb and forefinger a fold of the loose skin of the breast—and then...a skewer of bone, about the size of a carpenter's pencil was inserted. This was tied to a long skin rope fastened, at its other extremity, to the top of the sun-pole in the center of the arena. The whole object of the devotee is to break loose from these fetters. To liberate himself he must tear the skewers through the skin, a horrible task that even with the most resolute may require many hours of torture."<sup>2</sup>

The sacrifice of flesh to the sun is a Blackfoot tradition. Warriors would sometimes cut off bits of their skin to pray for success in their dangerous mission. Women would also cut off a finger and offer it to the sun to ensure the survival of a baby or to ask that another prayer be answered. Though certainly far less torturous, our berit milah ritual, where the baby boy's foreskin is cut off as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, strikes me as a gentler version of this ritual.

At the conclusion of our volunteer work, we went on a tour of Glacier Park which was once part of the Blackfeet territory -- today it borders on the Rez. Our tour guide, Wade Walking Crane, a Blackfeet, told us that he had danced a sun dance twice, praying for his son to return safely from Iraq. His son did return, physically in one piece, but with severe PTSD. Wade said he had neglected to pray for his son's mental safety.

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<sup>2</sup> A shocked Frederick Schwatka, wrote those words after watching a Sioux Sundance in the late 1899 for Century Magazine. <http://history.oldcolo.com/history/research/Utes2.html>



But he and so many others maintain hope that better days are ahead.

He, as so many, has returned to the Rez to try and help his people.

Wade told us about the Blackfeet medicine wheel which is divided into four equal sections: red, yellow, black and white, representing the four races. The Blackfeet believe that eventually, we will all come together as one, living in peace and harmony. Isn't this the very same hope for the future expressed by the prophet Zechariah, at the end of our Aleinu prayer, the prayer written for Rosh Hashana: "On that day Adonai will become One and God's name will be One"? This day will not arrive on its own, but by the determination of all of us to work for a better world. On Rosh Hashana, we celebrate the Creation of the world because it reminds us that we have the ability to renew ourselves, to become the people we hope to be, that we can make the world the place it should be. It reminds us that redemption is possible, that Eden can exist on earth if we set our minds to it, and

if we respect the divinity within each one of us. Let us pledge to work toward that goal this new year.

