

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Bo

Every year, as Passover approaches, I get calls from local Pastors to come and walk their congregation through a Seder. I ask them if they want a Jewish Seder or one according to the Torah. There is always a pregnant pause as they try to figure out why I draw a distinction -- they thought that they were one and the same. Of course, I have to explain that our tradition evolves and our ritual celebrations evolve, as well. The Torah's description of the celebration includes only its three symbols (matzoh, lamb, and a bitter herb), but the modern Jewish Seder has many additional symbols and expands the message of freedom past the limits of the biblical story of the Exodus. They want a biblical one, until I tell them that, according to the bible, they need to eat the lamb, the head and entrails, leaving nothing until morning. I end up talking about it, instead.

When we walk into our respective houses of worship, we somehow let ourselves believe that what we are doing ...is what has always been done. When we read scripture, we read it as though it was written in our own time, not 2000 - 3000 plus years ago. Somehow, we have decided that Abraham was Jewish or Moslem, though Judaism is named, at best, after his great grandson Judah, and Islam did not happen for a couple thousand years after that. Somehow, Jesus became a Christian, and Paul was speaking on behalf of the church. We have forgotten that it was the Baptists who implored Thomas Jefferson to maintain a strict separation of religion and state. How could we have forgotten that Barukh Spinoza, though a mainstream Jewish philosopher now, was excommunicated in his own day, or that they burned Maimonides' books in his own day? We worship as though our most ancient of ancestors parked in our same parking spots, sat in our same seats, and turned off the very same cell phones before worship commenced.

We have all inherited religious history. Some of that legacy is a blessing and some is not. Our own bible has some very difficult texts, where, if read literally, God does not come off as being very benevolent. The Quran is no different. In fact, as to all religions, more blood has been spilled bludgeoning each other over religion than any other single ideological cause. At the same time, we celebrate hope ... a hope that the day will come when peace reigns; the hope for healing that requires us to go out and do the work of healing the world; the hope that makes us pay attention to -- and respond to -- the cries for help in the world. I am not a Rabbi, or even a Jew (for that matter) because God spoke to Abraham or Moses spoke to God. If one stays strictly to a literal reading of the Bible, the world was either created in seven days -- OR -- there was an Adam and an Eve -- it cannot be both. I love working with those who say that the biblical story is history, because I always have to ask, "Which story is true and which one is not?" In truth, none of us are religious because of something that happened a long time ago, rather we have faith because of what we experience in our own lives. The historical story is the framework through which we make our faith tangible, but we are somehow afraid to admit this. Rather than see ourselves as part of the evolving process of faith, we have an irrational need to rewrite our texts to make them comport with what we want to believe they actually say. At the Passover Seder, we accept the command to remember that we were slaves in Egypt. We have to place ourselves back into the context of the biblical story, and experience the liberation and freedom as if it were our own. It is through that lens of history that we move forward and study the successes and failures of generations, as we move closer to the age of peace for all humanity. Wisdom comes from experience, and without

the perspective of history, we cannot attain the wisdom to know how to move forward. We treat the biblical personalities as though they appear for the first time, in their actual story, but set in our own day.

So many people run from religion today because they believe that most practitioners seem to be making it up as they go. My fear is that they are correct, and in doing so, we have lost touch with the core values that made our faith traditions viable to begin with. Mordechai Kaplan said that the past has a vote, but not a veto in how we practice our faith traditions. We are not bound to yesterday, but we cannot ignore it. It seems to me that if we really wanted to create a better religious environment; one that would be more engaging and fulfilling, we would spend less time on prophesying dogma and more time serving needs. When Daisy Muchado was installed as Dean at the Lexington Theological Seminary, she spoke words of prophecy that continue to make us think and search for better answers. She asked when were we going to understand that seminaries had to stop training ministers in theology and start training them in religious anthropology. We do not need to have more proof that God exists, we need to know what God does and what this understanding leads us to do. To know where we need to go, we need to know where we have been. We cannot improve on the past if we choose to ignore it. For there to be a better tomorrow, we have to know the standard of yesterday by which we measure progress. Shabbat Shalom.