

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Mikanetz**

I had the pleasure of watching the movie “Hester Street” last weekend. I watched as the entire tension of late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish America unfolded on the screen. In many ways, it was the story of our own Jewish Reformation, as new immigrants struggled somewhere between authenticity in faith tradition and relevancy in the new land. On one side of the argument is the notion that if you give in at all, tradition falls apart. On the other hand, if one remains steeped in the old world, then he lacks any ability to impact the evolving world around him. The main character came to America and worked in order to bring his wife and son over at a later date. Over the course of this time, he left his traditional roots and became an American. He never denied his Judaism, but understood that he had an obligation to be an American first. His wife found a very different man when they reunited. She was still very deeply rooted in her European Jewish ways. Her husband found her to be irrelevant in his life. The crux of the story was the dance (pun intended – see the movie and you will understand) in which they engaged to figure out how to live their new lives. Ultimately, she let go of her wig and her husband, and he found his way into the arms of a new dance partner who had also let her Jewishness evolve in the new world. The wife remarried a scholar who allowed her to keep one foot in the traditional world while firmly planting one foot in the new world. In so many ways, this is our story. In roughly an hour, we traced the creation of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements as they took their place in American culture. The movie was not overly kind to the Orthodox Rabbi who presided over the divorce, but did a wonderful job in demonstrating both the drive for meaning and the struggle to accept each other’s struggle that has ear marked Reform and Conservative Jewish relationships in this country. Neither is perfect, both are fraught with human frailty, both are quite relevant in their own frame of reference, and both are absolutely Torah true.

Perhaps what struck me most about the movie was its confluence with this week’s Torah portion, and the entire Joseph story. For all of the commentaries that argue for or against the merit of Joseph, what becomes absolute is that he is, as they say in the movie, “no longer a greenie.” While a lonson at heart, he is every bit an Egyptian in dress, culture, language, and certainly job description. He is so foreign to his roots, that his brothers have no sense that they have anything in common with this man to whom they bow when they come seeking grains. In the movie, when the time for the Get (divorce) comes, the new proud American dives back into his roots and his Hebrew is immaculate. He has not forgotten who he is. It is just that his daily life practice has evolved. His wife’s “old school” way of life threatens his new identity and his accepted place in society. To acknowledge her authenticity would threaten to undo his progress in starting over in this new land. The same is true for Joseph. He recognizes his brothers, his kinship with their dress and their language. Before them he is torn, not just as the scorned brother, but for the first time in years, he is amongst his own – and he cannot publicly acknowledge it without causing his own status and place great problems.

Dina malkhutah Dina. The Talmud teaches us that the law of the land you live in is to be the law you live by. Where Judaic tradition and secular law conflict, it is primary to be a good citizen. Certainly the tension we feel in the Jewish world is over how broadly or narrowly to interpret this command. The new American and Joseph argue that if we are to be part of the world then we must live in it, fully immersed. The Reform movement has always maintained that being relevant in the community is a greater mitzvah

than say any other. One cannot be an “Or lagoyim,” without living with and amongst the nations. Our existence depends on hearing the prophetic call to good citizenship. The Conservative movement has always maintained that while the command to be relevant is absolute, the link to tradition is essential for our existence. The Talmud says, “Aelu v’aelu divrae Elohim khayim – These words and these words are both the words of the living God.” In short, we are both right. What is so striking about this week’s Torah portion, though, is that while so many Jews use these divergent ideas to argue over each other’s legitimacy today, it is clear from as far back as Torah that we have always experienced this tension. “Aen khadash takhat ha shamesh – There is nothing new under the sun.” We have always been a people struggling to keep rooted in tradition and maintain a place in the evolving modernity. The Chanukkah story reminds us that while we got rid of the Syrian Greeks from the Temple, we held tightly to the study of philosophy and science that Greek culture brought to Israel. The words “synagogue,” “Sanhedrin,” “Moses,” “Esther,” and even the “dreydle” are adopted from foreign cultures in which we have lived. The most authoritative Talmud comes from Babylonia and not Jerusalem. Joseph’s assimilation is not the anomaly, it is the mandate, no differently than is his family’s request to be settled separate from normative Egyptian life, so as not to water down their own traditional lives. It this tension to evolve but not abandon that serves as our collective conscience and keeps us tied as one Jewish community, even while, as individuals, we all make divergent personal choices. I am not as pessimistic as my colleagues. I think we have to continue to grow and evolve with society if we are to remain alive and valuable as a culture. The question I will leave each of you with, though, is, while you are working to live in the real world around us, in the same spirit as the new American in the movie and Joseph in our Torah held, what do you do to recognize and acknowledge your own spiritual roots? Shabbat Shalom!