

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Vayigash

"Roses are Red. Violets are blue. If it were not for Christmas, we would all be a Jew." Okay, this is not the newest bad poem on the block, and, of course, it is not even at all true. It is however an interesting statement about the similarities in faith between people who claim to have little to do with each other. Perhaps it is too true, that it is simply a holiday's name that -- for many Americans -- is the sum total of difference in their religious observance. Even given the secularization of the holiday season, I think its world healing potential is tremendous, if for no other reason than for at least a short period of time, so many people are focused on celebrating time with each other, giving gifts to each other, shoring up business bottom lines in order to offer bonuses, even while they maximize their profits. Even the music of the holiday is healing.

Certainly there really is some beautiful Christmas music, but perhaps my favorite Christmas song is not one of the "oldies but goodies." True to my non-traditionalism, the lyrics to the late John Lennon's "So this is Christmas" resonate deeply. As the song plays, we are forced to ask ourselves whether the spirit of the holiday moves us to change how we view our place in the world. No, Jews do not celebrate Christmas -- well, not religiously. However, at least in America, we live some piece of the holiday every year, simply by leaving our homes, turning on a television, shopping in a store, or doing just about any event routine thing in our daily lives. The song reminds us to look back on the year that has been and determine what "wars" we have ended, from what exiles we have returned, and in what ways we have served to make the world better. Of course these are important values, whatever religion one espouses. When one's core religious values revolve around being relevant in the world in which we walk, all the more one must look to the times in which one lives and figure out how to be part of the ongoing conversation. In 21st century America, this means that the month of December is dedicated to celebrating the winter and yes ... wanting to admit it or not, acknowledging Christmas.

For me, this is easy. I have family and friends whom I love who celebrate the holiday as a part of their deeply rooted religious tradition. That would be reason enough for me to work to make sure the holiday is one worth celebrating. There is, however, a lot more at stake. The commitment to gifting our love and our healing efforts are not to be reserved for one people or one holiday. Towards this understanding, our local Jewish Federation recognizes this as a season of giving and serving. This now huge tradition originated as an effort to help our Christian neighbors by volunteering to work their shifts in hospitals and in various businesses, allowing them to spend the day with their own families. Many of us participate in programs and celebrations geared towards bringing communities together. Some are called holiday parties, some still Christmas parties, but in truth, whatever the name of the event -- it is a Christmas party. Yes, we have assimilated. Certainly we have all, in many ways assimilated.

I always think it odd that some part of this Joseph story gets read during Christmas. I wrote about assimilation last week, as we watched Joseph assimilate. This week, the question is not whether in assimilating we did or did not do the right thing. This week, the Torah portion begs a different question. Joseph is clearly in charge, but we have to ask if, as part of the Egyptian society, he lived and governed in a way that was good for us, good for Egypt, and/or even good for the world. Yes, it was his dream interpretation that accurately predicted the famine, and yes, at some level Egypt must be thankful for

his leadership that made sure that they saved surplus grains. At some point, though, in doling it back to Egypt, the Torah text shows Joseph to be almost heartless, taking everything people own (including selling themselves into servitude) just to get back their own grain. So, at this holiday of the giving season each year, we really have to wrestle with what kind of message the Biblical text might be sending. At the same time we celebrate Joseph's ability to survive against all odds, we have to remember that in the very next generation discussed with any detail, a new Pharaoh arises who knows not Joseph, who rebels against all for which Joseph stood. Joseph may have saved Egypt from starvation, but in so doing, he caused the overthrow of the government with which his Pharaoh had entrusted to his care. Even while we go about doing what we do to be relevant to life in our communities, we have to do a better job than did Joseph in making sure we look out for everyone, and not just the one's with whom we directly interact. He provided specifically for only his family, he hoarded for Pharaoh, and in the process caused the overthrow of both, threatening their very existence. Many commentators will argue that it is because of what Joseph did that we were enslaved for 400 years. We have to pay close attention to the decisions we make, especially as relevant parts of the communities in which we live. As we make it a Shabbat Shalom for ourselves, let's make it a Christmas worth celebrating for the community around us.