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Parashat Vayeshev

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First night of Hanukah

Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA

This past Wednesday was World AIDS Day. A day set aside to mourn our losses, to assess the situation, to forecast futures. This year's news ran, as usual, the gamut from grim to hopeful, but among the grimmest news of all on Wednesday was an item that came out of Israel: Israeli Health Minister Shlomo Benizri ... triggered an uproar in the Knesset on World AIDS Day after he was quoted in the press and on Israel Radio saying that homosexuality is an "aberration" and a "genetic and emotional defect which must be treated."

"These people have a mental problem, they are deviant. Instead of giving them legitimacy, we need to treat them," he told Reuters [News].

Benizri, from the ultra-Orthodox Shas [political party]... said:

"It is a sickness. They say they are like normal people. Psychologists have to encourage them and help them," he said.

"I am proud I have the values of our Bible and God...It's not the people I dislike, it's the phenomenon. And you know, I have friends who are homosexual too," he said. **1**

We are all, of course, outraged by his statements and his attitudes. BCC board member Steve Sass is currently helping me organize a meeting of local rabbis with LA's new Israeli Consulate, so that as a group, we might register our objection. But as outraged as I am by Minister Benizri, I am also saddened by one of the protest statements made against him. The statement came from Israeli Knesset Member Yehudit Naot of the Center-left Shinui party, a professor of medicine and an immunologist, who, in denouncing Benizri's remarks, also took him to task for his earlier decision to cancel a poster campaign portraying pictures of condoms because they were "offensive" to many members of the public.

The press quoted Dr. Naot as saying to Benizri, "I don't want to try to teach you about Judaism and the Torah, but I can teach you a thing or two about immunology and genetics. I can tell you Mr. Minister, that it is the right of every enlightened man and woman to know that the use of a condom will curb the dispersion of AIDS."

What distresses me is NOT Dr. Naot's anger or her support of safe sex education, but rather that she said to him, "I don't want to try to teach you about Judaism and the Torah." Why not? I wonder. Why not, Dr. Naot, try to teach Benizri something about a different view of Judaism and the Torah? To be fair, I don't know anything about Dr. Naot. I don't know for sure she is a woman except that the first name is Yehudit. I certainly don't know how she views Judaism. Indeed,

perhaps she is totally alienated from it, and by choice rejects it.

In truth, I'm using Dr. Naot, and perhaps unfairly (if so, I apologize), to pose a question to the rest of us. Why is it that liberal Jews are often so willing to defer to Orthodox Jews when it comes to "matters of Judaism and the Torah"? I don't doubt that Benizri believes his homophobic, pain-inducing views reflect, as he says, "the values of our Bible and God..." But if they do, then it is also true to say that WE? all of us gathered here in this sanctuary -- know a different Judaism, one filled with different values and, for that matter, with a different understanding of the God and the Bible that Benizri calls upon when he says, "I am proud I have the values of our Bible and God..."

Why not try to teach Benizri about Judaism and the Torah, Dr. Naot? Why is that presumptuous? Benizri and the political party to which he belongs, do not own Judaism, nor do they know all there is to know about it. And they certainly don't know about the queer Jews within Judaism.

They know next to nothing about us -- our lives, our values, our beliefs, our minds, our hearts. Why should we--why do we--so often defer to them then?

In this week's Torah portion, we find the story of Tamar and Judah. Judah is the one of Joseph's ten brothers who suggested sparing his life by selling him into slavery instead of leaving him in a pit to die [Gen. 37:26-28]. In an interruption in the story of Joseph, Parashat Yayeshev tells us a story of intrigue and disguise. I urge you to read it, it's Genesis all of chapter 38. In it Judah is a proud and, as it turns out, somewhat self-righteous patriarch and father of three sons, two of whom die in the early years of their marriage to the same woman, Tamar.

Although tradition calls for the third son to marry his brothers' widow, Tamar, Judah is afraid to let it happen for fear the third son might also die. In his fear, however, Judah fails to deal honestly with Tamar, and so to protect herself, she ends up cleverly getting herself pregnant by her father-in-law, by Judah, unbeknownst to him. When he finds out she is pregnant he orders her burned (and the latkes thought they had it hard!), until Tamar reveals the identity of the father. It is then that Judah realizes his own wrongdoing, and says the line the

Torah study group chose for the verse of the week this week in the seat bulletin. It takes only a brief moment for Judah to recognize all that has happened, to understand all he has done, and at that moment the until-then-self-righteous Judah makes one brief statement: "Tamar is more righteous than I am," [Gen. 38:26]. Judah had acted against the values of his tradition, the teachings of his father(s) and of God. And this was not the first time either, as we know from the story of his brother Joseph. But when Tamar, his daughter-in-law, a woman, a non-Israelite, for that matter, someone clearly below him in status and class according to his rules, when Tamar pointed out to him his own

wrong-doing, he stopped, he reflected. He withdrew his earlier condemnation of her, elevating her status instead of having her killed.

The most famous descendant of their son Perez, is none other than King David himself, from whose line, Jewish tradition tells us, the messiah will come. From the story of Judah and Tamar Jewish tradition teaches many lessons. One of them ought to be that as human beings, we all have rights. Another, that status does not equal righteousness, or rightness, nor should status always be the determiner of what is right. Another is that we can learn what Minister Benizri calls, "the values of our Bible and God," from many different people and in many different ways.

Tonight Hanukah begins, the season of miracles. Oddly enough, the heroes of the Hanukah story, the Maccabees, who supposedly helped save Judaism, also nearly helped destroy it by their insistence that there was a right way and a wrong way to be Jewish. Once in power, the Maccabee family ruled by oppression, not freedom of religion, and it was their oppressive behavior that caused the rabbis of the Talmud to downplay the Maccabees' role in the story of Hanukah, and to select instead a different message than that of a violent and tyrannical insistence on a particular approach to Judaism. What was the message the rabbis chose instead? The miracle of the oil, enough for one day only that burned, instead, for eight days. And to accompany that message, they also gave us a special Haftarah portion for this Shabbat of Hanukah, a second gift to us from the rabbis of the Talmud (the same rabbis that Health Minister Benizri follows). The portion is from the Book of Zechariah, and the gift is the Haftarah verse of the week in the seat bulletin tonight. The prophet Zechariah is shown by an angel a golden menorah with an olive tree on either side ? an olive tree, a symbol of peace, and here two olive trees, symbol perhaps of peace through relationship, through cooperation and mutual respect. "Don't you know what these things are [that you are looking at]?" the angel asked Zechariah. "No, my lord, I don't," said Zechariah, and so the angel explained to him with a quotation from God: "Not by might, and not by power, but by My spirit [alone]," says God" said the angel to Zechariah [4:1-6].²

Wouldn't it be nice, in this season of miracles, if from this time on, Jews could all come to treasure that message, that gift from God and from the rabbis of the Talmud, all of whom envision a world of peace and understanding, a world where each of us appreciates our own self and all the selves with whom we share God's glorious creation: [that is] this world and all who dwell therein. Happy Hanukah, Minister Benizri, and Happy "Season of Miracles" and Shabbat Shalom to all of us.

¹ Information and quotations on Health Minister Benizri and MK Naot come from an e-mailed article sent by the Jerusalem Open House, an organization of the g//b/t community of Jerusalem.

2 For more details on this view of the Maccabees, see Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, p.88-92 and Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p.115-118.