

July 23, 2010

Beth Chayim Chadashim

Parshat Va'ethannan

Deuteronomy 3:23:- 7:11

Drash by Davi Cheng

On a balmy August evening in Hong Kong, 1971, my immediate family and many of my relatives were gathered at a restaurant (yes, a Chinese restaurant) having our last meal together. This was the last of the many going-away banquets, and I mean MANY...like - almost every single night for a month, my family had attended a banquet to bid farewell to our friends and well-wishers.

This banquet was our last night in Hong Kong, we were to board the Ocean Liner USS President Wilson the next morning, to cross over the Pacific Ocean to America. By the time we had our 10th course of this 12-course meal, a thunder storm had begun, we were told that a huge Typhoon was approaching very quickly. So we hastily finished our meals, said our last goodbyes, and all headed home for safety before all the streets would be closed due to the weather.

Similar to the Richter Scale, the strength of a Typhoon is rated from 1 through 10. That night, the Typhoon warning reached number 10 - I remember the anxiety - we were huddled and sleeping in the middle of this room my parents rented for the night, we were to stay away from all the windows. Everything we had that was crated and packed up, had been loaded onto the ship earlier in the day, all we had left, were the suitcases we were to bring aboard. I remember the loud howling of the wind, and the rain hitting the windows like the sound of pebbles being thrown against the glass. In the middle of the night, one of the wooden window frames was ripped from the hinges by the wind, water was pouring in, and wind swirling in the room. Needless to say, we didn't sleep too well. I remember seeing the worry on my parents' faces. Will we be able to board the ship in the morning to cross over the Pacific Ocean to America?

This week's Torah portion Va'ethannan picks up from last week with Moses still addressing the Children of Israel. I suppose, if my family had a whole month of

goodbye banquets, Moses is allowed to have the whole book of Deuteronomy to say goodbye. Can you imagine Moses's anxiety? The Israelites were in a place of transitioning: changing leadership, changing location, changing a way of life, changing belief system, going from worship of carved images, to a God who has no form; on top of that, Moses will not be crossing over to the promised land with them, even though he pleaded with God to be allowed to do so. The Children of Israel too, must be quite anxious, not knowing what lies ahead.

Moses, hoping to bring the children of Israel closer to God, does his best to comfort the Israelites by telling all their stories. He recounts the history, telling in detail the journey out of Egypt, he tells the Children of Israel God's miracles and commands, he repeats the Ten Commandments, and gives explicit instructions about the importance of loyalty to God, including the '*Shema*'. Moses, is really pleading with the Children of Israel to take care, to observe and keep God's law, and to be responsible for their own actions, so that they may live.

By now, Moses is speaking to a generation that did not experience first hand the events he is describing, but he speaks to them as if they had been present at the events themselves.

Moses said, "...do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes, so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live." Moses continued, "And make them known to your children and to your children's children..." [Deuteronomy 4:9]

When I read that in preparation of this drash, it struck a chord in me and reminded me of something I've experienced recently at a conference, at the end of last month. A few of us from BCC, Jonathan Falk, Bruce Maxwell, Rabbi Lisa Edwards, Cantor Juval Porat and I, were invited to attend the first ever convening of GBLT Jewish Leaders around the nation that took place at Berkeley.

90 or so Jewish activists, and leaders from GBLT Jewish organizations and synagogues were represented, it was a cross denomination, cross generational gathering. One of the exercises we did, was to create a timeline of all the GBLT Jewish events - from pre-Stone-Wall to the present.

On large pieces of paper that were taped together and spanned across an entire wall, people took turns and wrote in what they individually remembered. When we finished, I was so amazed how much was written on there, and how little I knew.

For the first time, I saw, with my own eyes on this timeline, where we (GLBT Jews) had come from, and where we are today. Now I understood why Moses said, "...do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes, so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live." By telling our stories over and over again, it is like we have seen it with our own eyes even though we were not there. We also keep it alive for our next generations to experience.

I also learned from this timeline exercise, how little we really know of our own GLBT Jewish history, especially the younger generations, some were not even born when Harvey Milk was murdered.

Yes, there are movies and books and internet, and organizations like ONE - the National Gay & Lesbian archives that preserves GLBT history. But how many of us, get to hear the stories, of these events told from the mouths of those who have seen it with their own eyes? And how many of us care enough to listen, to learn it so well, that we can turn around, and make it known to our children, and our children's children?

Here at BCC, we have our history, we are the world first and original GLBT synagogue established and accepted into the mainstream Reform movement. Do we know the names of our founders? Can we tell our children and our children's children our struggles to be accepted? How about the fire that burned down MCCLA where we once held services, and who rescued our Torah from the water of the fire hoses, flattened it with books and dried it with a hair dryer?

Next month, (August 15) BCC will be breaking ground on our new building, we too are at a place of transition. Once we settle into our new place, we, those of us who are here today, will be witnesses to this event; we will see it with our own eyes and remember. So let us take our time, observe more carefully, and remember what we

see, how we feel, so that we can tell our stories, to those who follow us. We are all making history in this history making congregation. Collectively, and individually, we have stories to tell. And those of you here tonight, who remembered our founders and have the answers to the questions I posed earlier, do tell.

Sharing stories, is a way of getting to know oneself, and one another better. Hopefully, we can share our GLBT stories, and bring the larger community closer to us, and be our allies.

By morning, the wind had slowed to a breeze, and the rain stopped. The sun was trying to peak through some clouds. I remember looking out the back window of the car as we were being driven to the dock - we passed some huge uprooted trees, fallen street signs, and downed wires; there was no power yet, and traffic lights were not working. Luckily the sea was calm enough for us to leave. We unraveled and threw down these long streamers from the deck onto the dock to our uncles and aunts, and we hung on to these bundles of colored streamers as long as we could as the ship moved away from the dock, as my family began our journey crossing over the Pacific Ocean.

And as for the Israelites, you'll have to read the rest of Deuteronomy.
Shabbat Shalom.

