

Jan. 8, 2009

Parashat Sh'mot (Exodus 1:1 - 6:1)

Drash by Davi Cheng

Beth Chayim Chadashim

Multiple Identities

Shabbat Shalom

I was counting the years the other day (pause) and I realized that come this September in 2010, I will be celebrating my 39th year living here in the United States, just one year short of the magic number 40. For those who do not know, I was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to the States with my family in 1971.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of life I would be living now if my family had not made that move; this I know for sure though...I would not have become Jewish, and I would not have been able to marry the woman I love. But growing up here was not easy either; at times I was too Chinese to fit in with my mostly Caucasian classmates in Santa Cruz, or I was too American to fit in with my Chinese friends in San Francisco. Now, I'm just too gay to the Chinese and too Chinese to the Jews.

This week's Torah portion Sh'mot begins with the naming of Jacob's family and a reminder of how Joseph moved the Children of Israel into Egypt. We also learn that Moses's mother, to save Moses from Pharaoh's order to kill all male infants born to Hebrew women, placed him in a basket and put him into the Nile when he was 3 months old. The daughter of Pharaoh discovered him, named him Moses, and raised him as her own son. (The first cross cultural adoption!)

Given all the circumstances, I always wonder how Moses would identify himself. I find it really interesting that there are never any detailed descriptions on what people looked like in the Torah. Did Moses look different from the Egyptians? Different hair color? Maybe different skin-tone? We'll never know.

What we know from the Torah is that Pharaoh's daughter did identify Moses as a Hebrew; for when she opened the basket from the Nile and saw the crying boy, she said, " This must be a Hebrew child." *[Exodus 2:6]* We also know, from the Torah, that Miriam, Moses's sister, was able to get Pharaoh's daughter to hire Moses's own mother to nurse him until he was

weaned; *[Exodus 2:7-10]* which some believed to be at the age of 3 years old. *[The Torah - A Women's Commentary p. 312]*

From 4 years old to adulthood, Moses apparently grew up in the Pharaoh's palace. He must have acquired some Egyptian lifestyle and identity, don't you think? However, the Torah said that when Moses was out witnessing the labors of his "kinfolks" or "Hebrew brothers" *[ish-Ivri me'echav; Exodus 2:11]*, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, so he killed the Egyptian and fled to Midian. But then in Midian, Moses was identified by the daughters of Midian's priest as an Egyptian, for they said to their father, " An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds." *[Exodus 2:19]*

Moses then settled in Midian and married Zipporah, daughter of the Midian priest (here is a cross cultural marriage) and they have a son. When Moses's son was born, Moses named him Gershom, which means "Sojourner There", and Moses said, "I have been a stranger (Hebrew word: ger) in a foreign land." *[Exodus 2:22]*

"I have been a stranger in a foreign land." That was exactly how I felt some years back; that could have been me saying it. Could it be that

Moses feels like an outsider? And that he could not relate to being either a Hebrew or an Egyptian? Could it be that he didn't know where he belongs, so he stayed in Midian to avoid having to deal with his internal identity conflict?

When God called on Moses from the burning bush to free the Israelites from Egypt, Moses answered, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the people from Egypt?" [Exodus 3:11] Maybe Moses really was confused with his own identity, maybe he was actually asking himself "Who am I? I don't even know who I am, how can I go and free the others?"

Moses continued, "What should I tell them when they ask me the name of this God of the ancestors?" and God replied, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh" "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be, so you shall tell the Israelites that Ehyeh, "I will be" sent me to you". No one really knows what this really means, but maybe God was trying to tell Moses to just be Moses. Maybe God knew that Moses, having spent time with three separate people and cultures, the Israelites, Egyptians, and the Midianites, could see things in a way that others could not, and have a wider understanding of differences. Maybe this is why God enlisted Moses.

It is comforting for me to learn that Moses too struggled with identity issues. I think that all of us, at one time or another, struggle to find ourselves. Whether it is dealing with being Jewish, or being straight, or being queer; it doesn't matter what it is. It could be a gender issue, or it could be expectations from a certain profession, or being tall, being short, or ____ You fill in the blank. Some identities we were born with, others we acquired later in life; some are forced upon us by society, or by uncontrollable circumstances, or we create them ourselves.

Like I said earlier, first I was too Chinese, then I was too American, then I was too gay, and now I am too Jewish, but it's not too much for me anymore, because I am who I am.

May all of us be who we are in this new year.

Shabbat Shalom!