

Exodus: Parshat Bo  
Beth Chayim Chadashim  
1/30/04  
Drash by Davi Cheng

In this week's Torah Portion: Exodus - Parshat Bo, we read that God gave Pharaoh the three final blows. First the east wind blew in locusts so heavy that they occupied every inch of Egypt the locusts consumed all the plants until nothing at all green is left throughout the land. Then for three days a gloomy darkness covered Egypt; darkness so thick that people could not even move from where they were sitting or standing, (except for the Children of Israel, they got light in their settlements). And finally, came the death of the first born in the middle of the night that convinced Pharaoh to let Moses and his people go. The gate of Egypt was at last opened so that the Children of Israel could leave.

The narrator lets us know who is leaving Egypt: "The Children of Israel about six hundred thousand on foot, menfolk apart from little-ones, and also a mixed multitude went up with them, along with sheep and oxen, and exceedingly heavy amount of livestock" 12:37-38] - A mixed multitude, "erev rav" they were called, (erev rav does not really mean the evening of the rabbis, by the way) so who were these people? There were no descriptions on where they came from, what they looked like, or why they left with the Israelites. However, there are many different explanations and midrashim on what kind of people they are. Some said that they are the "asasuf", the riffraff, the outcasts of society, the trouble makers throughout the journey in the desert. They were the ones who complained, "who shall give me meat to eat?"; "we're thirsty, why did you bring us out of Egypt to died here in the desert?"; "where is that man Moses, let's build us a Golden Calf!" In the traditional midrashim, this mixed multitude was seen as a bad influence. They were blamed for the bad things that happened along the way in the desert.

I think they were a group of minorities being categorized because they were

different. People who were on the fringe; they were the [quote, unquote] "others", not of the majority. All of us in the gblt community have experienced being labeled as the "others"; and have been called, "bad influence," we too are being categorized because we are different. "Don't talk to them, they will recruit you and make you gay" "you'll get AIDs from them". How quickly do we point fingers and put blame on a minority group? At people different from ourselves? Even within our own community, we categorize people.

Last weekend, I was in San Francisco at the Be'chol Lashon conference, [Be'chol Lashon means IN EVERY TOUNGE in Hebrew]. The conference is a Think Tank for multicultural Jews, this is the description of our group: "We are different cultures, languages and colors, yet we share Israel, Hebrew and Torah." For the unexpected guests who walked into the plush Fairmont hotel where we were staying and having our meetings, we must have looked like a mixed multitude, the "erev rav" to them. And yes, we were the trouble makers, the complainers. We grumbled about racism, and anti-Semitism. We picked up our conversation from where we left off last year, to continue to try and open the gates of the larger Jewish community, to build bridges between the different cultures and movements within Judaism.

The group, about 50 of us, spent almost every minute of the three days together; we shared amazing stories of our journeys with one another. How we left our own Egypt and traveled to where we are now; we shared sorrow and sadness as we listened to the many stories of struggles and non-acceptance that still exists in many parts of the world, and in the United States! We learned about the isolations, the loneliness of our Jewish brothers and sisters, cutoff from the mainstream and labeled as the "others"; all because they are different in people's eyes. We also educated one another on our differences, but most importantly, after spending three days together we discovered how similar we are, and how much we do have in common.

Many of you here tonight are wearing the kippot from the Abajudaya Jews of Uganda, and met my friend Gershom and his family here at BCC. Maybe sometime this year you'll get to wear a kippa from Tijuana, Mexico, and meet a new friend of mind. So stay tuned at BCC, and don't change that dial.

I think maybe we need to write some new stories, new midrashsim. So who are these "erev rav", the mixed multitude who left Egypt with the Children of Israel? They were people who wanted freedom too. Are they half Egyptian, half Hebrew? Maybe. Maybe they were the interracial and interfaith people. Some of them might have straight black hair and looked like Asians, or as I imagined in Egypt, the ones who really would look different were probably the Caucasians! So they could have blonde hair and blue eyes too, like Bracha my love over there. Instead of being the bad influence, they were the ones who were brave enough to ask for equality, to ask for food and water when people were hungry, so that God provided and gave everyone water to drink, and meat to eat. Maybe they were the ones who saw the danger and suggested to Aaron, Moses's brother, to build a Golden Calf to avoid being harmed by the increasingly impatient, unreasonable, and angry mob; to stall until Moses returned. I think the mixed multitude in the Torah just got a bad rap and no one was there to defend them.

We are all mixed multitude, we are the trouble makers and the complainers, we are the people who try to close gaps between cultures and communities; we try to build bridges and ask for equal treatment, we try to make this world a safer place for all humanity. There was a reason why the mixed multitude left Egypt and went up with the Children of Israel, so that we can walk along side on the journey, to educate and help open more gates, so that more people can go out from their oppression.