

Beth Chayim Chadashim

Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Parashat Yitro

1/24/03

Yesterday I went with Ray Eelsing and his sister, Michelle, to Hillside Cemetery to look at the choice of grave stones to mark the interment site of BCC member Ed La Fuente, Ray's partner, who died last May. Ray asked how many words could be inscribed on the small bronze plaque he chose. The consultant said they would try to fit on whatever he wanted. Then Ray, Michelle and I took a long walk through the cemetery, stopping at the graves of BCC members - none of whom Ray or Michelle knew. At each grave, I tried to tell them a story or two about the person [Ralph Stevens, Alan Balsam, Ira Zucker, Benn Howard, Bob White, Larry Altman]. We read various grave markers in our wanderings, noting that most contained only the persons name and the year of birth, the year of death, maybe the relationships - loving husband, father, son - that sort of thing. A few had longer descriptions. We noted that no notation of course could capture a whole life in so small a space. We joked about inscribing Ed's marker with very small print. And then we thought about how nice that might be because it would require you to lean over, or kneel down - to get close to the ground, to the grave - in order to read the words. It would mean that only one person at a time could read it. I rather liked the intimacy of that. Regardless of what the words said, a particular message would be delivered.

Over the years I've been at BCC I've really come to appreciate cemeteries - the way each visit to bury someone also brings me the opportunity to visit the graves of other friends I've helped bury, and thus brings me to sweet, gentle memories of them. The visits also help me see where I am in my own grief - how my heart is healing, how the memories of my loved ones play different roles in my life as time passes.

I notice that cemeteries don't do that for everyone. Some of us go hesitantly, if at all, a bit fearful perhaps - afraid of what? ghosts maybe, or memories perhaps, our own tears, or maybe fearful that we won't remember them very well anymore, or just insistent that we don't need a cemetery to keep our loved ones in our hearts. Maybe a cemetery just shouts out to us words we'd rather not think about: words like "mortality," "death," "grief," "loneliness." I think I used to think/feel all those things about cemeteries too, but I've come over the years to like having a place to go, graves to visit, yet another way of encouraging me to take note of what places my dead ones occupy in my life -- at this particular moment in my life. Maybe it's a little for me like reading Torah - every year looking forward to the same stories, knowing they will be different for us this year than last, not because the story changes, but because we change.

This week in Torah we read a story we read more than once a year (this week and again during the holy day of Shavuot). The story of standing again at Sinai, experiencing God's revelation there, accompanied by thunder and lightening, a quaking mountain, loud blasts on an unseen shofar, and the hearing of the first declaration of the 10 commandments in

what seems to be God's own voice.

Davi noted that the smokey mountain was similar to the burning bush. The burning bush was on a more intimate scale to be sure - a small bush, a one-on-one conversation between Moses and God, with God's voicing coming from the midst of the burning bush. In this week's scene the mountain is like a giant burning bush -- God's voice comes forth from the mountain accompanied by thunder and lightening and all. In both scenes a lot is in the presentation - no matter what words came out of God's mouth.

It strikes me that a lot depends not just on the presentation, but on how we perceive the presentation. Is the revelation at Sinai a scary time or a loving time? Were the people standing at the foot of the mountain trembling in fear or in awe? The Hebrew word for what they were doing there means both "fear" and "awe." And the Midrash takes note of the ambiguity. Playing on the Hebrew phrase, b'tach-tit ha-har, which is usually translated "foot of the mountain," the midrashim note that preposition b'tach-tit also means "under," and two different midrashim imagine that literally: One says that God is actually holding the mountain directly over the people's heads, threatening to drop it on them, while saying: "And now, IF you'll listen to My voice and observe My covenant, then you'll be a treasure to me out of all the peoples" [19:5] The "or else" isn't in the text, but you get the picture ...

The second midrash also imagines the people actually standing under the mountain - this one says the mountain is a chupah, a wedding canopy - and that the words that God and Israel say to one another there are marriage vows, with the 10 commandments serving as the ketubah, the written contract. That's certainly a sweeter imagining of the same scene.

Not only thanks to Cecille B. DeMille, I suspect that most of us think of God's voice on Mt. Sinai as being a loud and thundering voice. In fact, one of the verses describing the scene is often translated as, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder [Ex. 19:20] - no wonder we imagine God's thunderous voice. But as some of us have noted in our studies, the Hebrew doesn't say "thunder," it says v'ha-elohim ya-a-na-nu v'kol - God answered him in a voice. What kind of voice? The text doesn't say.

The midrash wonders about this too, noting that the first word out of God's mouth in the ten commandments is anochi - meaning "I"-- and the first letter of that word is aleph, which is a silent letter - God's voice speaking the ten commandments thus begins, not in thunder, but in silence.

What if, when "God spoke all these words," God whispered them?

What happens when someone whispers? For one, the listener tends to lean in closer, often the whisperer does too. Thus, the act of whispering automatically creates an intimacy between whisperer and listener.

... Kind of like small print on a tombstone.

One of the local cemeteries that many of our BCC friends are buried in is called Mt. Sinai. This year, as I read the Torah's story of the Israelites standing at Mt. Sinai in the same week as my cemetery walk, I am struck -- not by lightning -- not by fear -- but by the privilege of gathering among loved ones - living and dead -- to listen to the voice of God.

It is customary to stand when we listen to the 10 commandments:

[LISA READ 10 commandments from Exodus]