

“Looking down in the Holy Land”

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May 4, 2007/ L'B omer
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Los Angeles, CA

I spent a lot of our recent trip in Israel looking down. It was a new perspective for me. Like any tourist or pilgrim, in past visits and sojourns to the Holy Land I have more typically held my head high -- trying to take it all in -- looking up and out -- over there and over there, oh and don't miss that just behind you, look quick! before the bus rounds the bend.

But looking down gives one an excellent sense of place too. I became acutely aware of things I barely took note of before how feet kick up little clouds of dust when dust is what you're walking on, how uneven cobblestones are, what beautiful wood they use on the steps and footbridges and walkways specially built for tourists and pilgrims, the interesting salt formations clinging to the steel pylons of the canopy that shaded us while we floated in the Dead Sea, and so many stairs - everywhere -- uneven stone steps worn smooth (and slippery) by centuries of pilgrims' feet treading upon them.

Oh, I've not yet told you why I spent so much time looking down this trip.

Some of you know already. One of the pilgrims on our BCC trip was my cousin Leslie, who lives in Berkeley, and who spends her waking hours in a wheelchair. Some of you have met Leslie when she's been here with us for Simchat Torah and for seder in the last couple of years. Berkeley, California, by the way, recently won recognition as “the most accessible city in the country.” Leslie, who is an accessibility activist, had something to do with that achievement. To say the least, it was quite a culture shock for her to go from the most accessible city in a fairly accessible country (thanks to the ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) to a country like Israel which, even though it has a lot of need for accessibility -- not only for the usual reasons but also because of the huge number of baby strollers AND war wounded -- and even though it is making an effort -- they do have accessibility codes for new constructions, etc. for example, though our guide told us those codes are often ignored -- a country that despite the codes and the needs, is by in large, still an inaccessible country. Which is why I kept looking down -- can Leslie come here with us? Will the wheelchair work here - on this stretch of rocky road? How will we get around that road construction ditch? Or those diners sitting at the outdoor tables on the narrow sidewalks? How will she get past the vines growing over the wheelchair ramp at the winery? I would estimate that about half of what we did or saw in our two weeks was off limits to Leslie (though she did get to go some places we didn't go), and just about everything was restricted in some way. But there were moments of amazement -- like when she joined us on the top of Masada!

Every visit to Israel is a study in contrasts, of course. I often feel like a misfit there, even more so this time. Always when I'm there I walk around knowing that the ever present ultra Orthodox Jews at best would seek to change me, more likely would prefer just not to acknowledge my existence, and at worst would seek violence against me for being a lesbian, let alone for daring to claim a voice in Judaism. In our visit this time to the Jerusalem Open House, the extraordinary LGBT center in Jerusalem (some annual reports in the info racks in the hallway), we were treated to a preview of a scary new documentary that we'll all get to see at OUTFEST this year about the siege they were under, first in trying to organize WorldPride last summer, and then a Pride parade last November. Noa Sattah, the ED of JOH, has said “the religious folks who oppose us don't have a clue who we are -- to them we

are perverts who wish to parade naked to the Kotel.”

Every visit to Yad vaShem – the Holocaust memorial & museum – reminds me that as a Jew, a woman, a lesbian, the chances of my surviving would have been slim. This visit, as I walked through the new Yad Vashem building alongside Leslie in her wheelchair, I couldn't help but think, as she did too, how quickly she would have been killed had she been alive in that time and place.

In this week's Torah portion, Emor, we read of the restrictions placed upon Levites who have physical “blemishes” “defects” “disabilities” –“No man of your offspring,” God tells Moses to tell Aaron, “who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the sacrificial offerings” [Leviticus 21:17f]. The defects are also listed in quite some detail, though several of the terms are used only there and we don't for sure know what they mean. The Hebrew word is moom and the long list includes broken legs and arms, lost eyes, hunchbacks, dwarves, crushed testes, among others. The Talmud and later codes continue the prohibition by barring Cohanim with physical defects from offering the priestly benediction over the congregation. (see footnote) The commentators have a variety of opinions of course for the what and the why of this troubling instruction. Most, when they pursue the why at all, conclude that even though it's about the person who offers sacrifices to God, God requires the physical perfection so that the people witnessing it - receiving atonement or receiving the blessing - won't be put off by the physical dissimilarities of the priests, won't lose their concentration. In other words, it is our human tendency to stare and be distracted by people different from us that prompts God's instruction to keep such people out of sacred tasks.

Leslie speaks with great difficulty and has an attendant – Alejandra - with her at all times who, among other gifts, repeats Leslie's words for those of us who have trouble understanding her. Many of us got better and better at understanding her over the couple of weeks we were with her. It takes concentration. It takes focusing on what she is saying and not on how she is saying it; it takes listening to her instead of focusing on oneself – not panicking that you won't understand, not thinking how hard her life must be, not thinking “there but for fortune...” It takes looking at her face and trying to read her lips, instead of looking away, looking down.

I can understand how the Torah and the Rabbis worried about people's concentration if a Cohain had a disability. In ways, it's not unlike the difficulties women rabbis and then gay, lesbian, bi and trans rabbis have had – especially in the early years people questioned whether we could do the job since congregants found it difficult to focus on what we were saying instead of on whatever they were focusing on – picturing us in our bedrooms, most likely. There were some who would have prohibited women and l.g.b or t's from becoming rabbis not due to incompetence or inability on our part, but due to incompetence on their part – due to their inability to embrace difference and diversity, their inability to focus on what is important or their UNwillingness to open their hearts.

I can understand how the Torah and the Rabbis worried about people's concentration if a Cohain had a “blemish” [moom, μWm]. I can understand, but I don't approve.

Sylvia transcribed the Torah teaching Leslie offered us last Shabbat, based on her master's thesis on the Talmud's attitude and treatment of deaf-mutes. In it Leslie told us:

“Most of the Talmudic rabbis thought that the deaf mute were incompetent, even though they thought the deaf or the mute were competent.

But there were a few rabbis – like Rabbi Meir – who thought they may be competent.

Rabbi Meir thought that the prayer of the heart was more important than the prayer of a person who could hear their own voice or who was not able to articulate the prayer.”

I haven't yet looked in Talmud to see what, if anything, Rabbi Meir had to say about whether Cohanim with deformities can offer blessings and perform sacred tasks. You gotta think, though, that he would be okay with it. Because he got it about what's most important – he got it about the prayer of the heart, which, whether you're praying it at the Kotel or on top of Masada, in the Jerusalem Open House or any of the 23(?) Reform synagogues that now exist in the Holy Land (there were 3 when Tracy and I lived there in 1989), whether you're praying it in this sanctuary, facing east toward Jerusalem or facing west because you don't really care that much about Israel, whether you're praying it standing up or while marching for immigrant rights or against the war, whether you're praying it while sitting in a wheelchair or driving on the 405 in rush hour, and whether you call it prayer or reject that idea altogether, the prayer of the heart is really all that our tradition, and I think, really all that God wants from us – well, that and what we do for and with each other to make this world an open-hearted place.

Which is why even though I feel blessed to have spent two weeks with a particularly wonderful group of people, I know I didn't have to travel all the way to the Holy Land to be reminded of where my heart is most open --- I'm reminded it of every day here at home with you at BCC.

Shabbat shalom

Footnote: The shulchan aruch (Orach Chaim chapter 128 numbers 30 and 31) mentions 2 leniencies. One is where the kohain with the mum is known in the community (has lived there for 30 days). In this case people know about the mum and will not lose concentration. The other leniency is one suggested by Rabbi Yosef Karo (author of the shulchan aruch. - in his earlier work Kesef Mishna on the Rambam, he suggests it but is unsure, but in the shulchan aruch he says it authoritatively). The leniency is, that in a place where the custom is for the Kohanim to cover their faces (and in some places hands too) with their tallis [prayer shawl], if the mum is covered by the tallis, then it is ok. http://www.ottmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v9/mj_v9i44.html#CJC