

Parashat Toledot

Dec. 1, 2000/ 5 Kislev 5761

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
Rabbi Lisa A. Edwards

On the occasion of the 80th Birthday of Harriet Perl and World AIDS day

Toledot is the Torah portion we read this week — V'eileh Toledot Yitzchak ben Avraham — it begins, and it's sometimes translated as "These are the begettings of Isaac, son of Abraham," [Everett Fox] and sometimes as "These are the generations of Isaac, son of Abraham," [Soncino] and sometimes "This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham" [JPS].

Jewish stories — just like stories in lots of cultures — often include who was begotten and who begot them and whom they in turn begat. In our community, in particular, we have learned that generations are not always begatted(!) — that predecessors and descendants, first generations and next generations and generations-to-come can be related only infrequently by blood, and more often by happenstance and history and sometimes by choice. At BCC, we've learned that the creation of families based on such connections as ours are often more binding, more bonding than blood.

Harriet, you are from BCC's oldest generation — both in the number of years you've lived and the number of years you've been a part of BCC. Your influence has already affected a number of generations that have followed you to this place. Your story has become part of our story. Your presence at BCC continues to have lasting effects. From the moment you stepped foot into BCC in 1973 you began to be a role model of how to make a woman's voice heard in a traditionally male dominated place like a synagogue — including your creation — along with Jesse Jacobs, z'l — of what was probably the world's first degenderized prayerbook. Back when feminist politics were often still homophobic and anti-semitic, and when gay men and lesbians didn't always see eye to eye (unlike now!!!!???), you made your way as a radical, outspoken, secular Jewish lesbian in some scary times and dangerous places. You lived true to your heart and to your essence even when you had to hide to keep your job. Always a beloved and tough English teacher at Hamilton High, through the years you became to students and former students a new kind of role model as one by one they bumped into you here at BCC. And even now, at an age when many people take a back seat, you keep driving, you keep speaking out (as I know we're about to hear), you keep touching people's lives. One of the many things I especially appreciate about you, Harriet, is how you become a role model for people who are role models to you. Case in point, Ellen Degeneres, whom you worshipped with a certain intensity that I only wish Judaism inspired in you too! Because you bothered to write and tell Ellen of your admiration, you've become a role model to her also,

and a friend to her mother, Betty, who included you in her book, thus giving you an opportunity to be a model to even more folks.

Or case in point, me, whom you honor as a rabbi in a way so sweet and generous, and yet, you are my teacher far more often than I am yours. Through your years of generosity to this community, Harriet — your considerable financial and volunteer gifts, including your countless hours on committees and the board — and your willingness to continue to be radical and outspoken here, you continue to make a difference not only in your own life, and in the lives of those of us privileged to know you, but also to many generations current and still to come who may never know you or even know your name but will benefit nonetheless by the ways you've done tikkun olam, Harriet, by the ways you've helped make this world a better one to live in...I mean, a better one in which to live!

May you be blessed, Harriet, with many more years of feistiness and fervor, and may you live to see yet more generations whose lives are touched by your spirit and your drive and your insistence on telling us what we need to know.

L'dor va Dor — from generation to generation, we learn from one another.

L'dor va Dor — from generation to generation, we learn to honor one another.

Yaffa Weissman has some words for us about Harriet...and then Harriet has the last words, of course.

On this World AIDS Day, 2000, we lovingly remember members of the BCC community who lived and then died with complications from AIDS:

Dave Arneson,
 Alan Balsam,
 Brian Binder,
 Marc Bliefield,
 Rick Block,
 Richard Brandys,
 Rob Eichberg,
 Howard Ehrlich,
 Steve Ehrlich,
 Lou Fox,
 Julio Gato,
 Andy Gilbert,
 Jerry Gordon,
 Jeff Herman,
 Art Horowitz,
 Benn Howard,
 Steven Kassler,
 Gary Leyner
 Michael Langer,
 Alan Mitnick,

Jack Mann,
Steven Naiman,
Skip Perlman,
Martial?Rios,
Victor Robinson,
Jay Schlachter,
Mike Schmalfeldt,
Fred Schuldiner,
Rue Starr,
Gil Tsafir
Hal Walker, Jr.,
Terry Wolfe,
Stuart Zinn,
Ira Zucker.

Lawrence PINSKER POEM, a version of El Maley Rachamim that does not specifically refer to God:

Everyone cries out , “Mercy,”

yet the soul is restless, and in our hearts,

there is a weary flutter of wings and a disquietude we cannot escape.

Doves hover and rest, their wings shape shelter for each other against darkness, rain,
and unbearable light.

So we, too, gather to give these souls a canopy of memory.

We are their safe haven, the place where nothing they hoped and won is lost or forgotten.

Rest here with us, sweet presence.

How brightly they shine in each moment recalled,

laden with the promise of peace and paradise woven from their deeds among us.

Now they are here.

They are a part of everything we hold sacred and holy in the midst of these, our thoughts of them.

Let them be bound up in the bond of living

May they rest in peace, these dear ones,

And let us say, Amen.

[Lawrence Pinsker in Reconstructionist Rabbi's Manual, p PD-18]