

Rabbi Lisa Edwards**Beth Chayim Chadashim
Parashat Emor****May 11, 2001 Omer 34**

I had a sneak preview of the window last weekend when they were installing it. I love in this window our artists' version of the notes and prayers that Jews gently push into the crevices of the Wall in Jerusalem – see them? The rainbow colored prayers tucked lovingly between the stones? Fran hadn't seen the window until tonight, but she knew that among its images was a stone wall. In describing the window to her I told her that there were rainbow colored notes in the wall. She paused a moment and said something like, "huh, that sounds ...lovely." Not until later in the conversation did we both realize that when I said "rainbow notes," Fran immediately pictured musical notes! It makes perfect sense of course: Fran was simply looking at the "picture" window through her own particular "window" on the world: music! And she's probably right anyway, that at least some of the rolled up prayers in the wall are prayers that should be sung.

How often does each of us do what Fran did – that is, see the world through our own particular "window"? A few weeks ago I happened to be in a hospital waiting room when a surgeon came by to let a family know that everything had gone well in surgery. The plan, the doctor reminded them, had been to do 4 four bypasses for sure, and possibly a fifth, they wouldn't know until they got in there. The surgeon reported, "we did 4 not 5. The 5th was too small to worry about. If it's too small to operate on," he said, "it's not important." His words echoed in my mind: "hmm," I thought, "if it's too small to operate on, it's not important." I thought of the phrase, "it's the little things that count." "If it's too small to operate on it's not important" is definitely seeing the world through a surgeon's window!

Some of you have been asking me what I think about all this recent controversy that Conservative Rabbi David Wolpe stirred up by discussing in a Passover sermon the ongoing question of whether the Exodus from Egypt really happened. He chose to talk about it, he said, on Pesach in particular, because he knew a lot of people would be there then, and he chose to talk about it at all because he wanted to offer a religious perspective on the subject, since it has mostly been archeologists lately talking about whether the exodus happened. It's a science vs. religion argument again. Did creation happen as it's told in Genesis or as it's told by evolutionists? If there is no archeological evidence of Jews wandering in the wilderness, does that mean that the exodus from Egypt didn't happen at all or happened differently from how Torah describes it?

Rabbi Wolpe said he wanted to use the issue to talk about faith in the face of doubt. He doesn't think that science should shake our faith even if the scientific explanation turns out to be the true one. [Jewish Journal April 13, 2001, p. 10]. He is in agreement, I think, with one of his Reform rabbi defenders writing in the Jewish Journal, who said, "It is the truths in Torah, not its facts, which are essential," [Rabbi Steven J. Leder, Jewish Journal, April 20, 2001, p. 10].

Of course, like surgeons (and rabbis), archeologists look at the world through their own particular window as well. In fact, the archeologists would probably really appreciate our new window, for the presence of a wall in it echoes (among other "Stone Walls" in our history) an actual archeological find -- the Kotel, the Western Wall, known to be the retaining wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed a couple of millenia ago. The Wall in Jerusalem has become one of the few actual places in the world that Jews consider to be a holy site -- that some Jews consider to be a holy site anyway.

Jews, like other people, understandably feel comforted when facts back up their beliefs. One of the writers criticizing Rabbi Wolpe in the Jewish Journal wrote, "If the Exodus did not occur, there is no Judaism," [Dennis Prager, Los Angeles Jewish Journal, April 20, 2001, p.11] which strikes me as quite an odd statement, given the fact that there is Judaism, even though there are serious, religious Jews who do not believe the Exodus happened, and other serious, religious Jews who do not care if the exodus happened. I might be willing to argue that if there is no story of the exodus there is no Judaism, but not that "if there is no Exodus, there is no Judaism."

It seems ironic too, that some of the Jews who say we don't need archeologists to tell us that the exodus happened are the same Jews who are so happy to have had the archeologists give them the Wall in Jerusalem. Hard fact, cold stone, comforts them when it comforts them. Those who need to believe that the exodus happened exactly as it's told in Torah, have their own window on the world, I guess, but it seems to me their window looks out on a wall, a wall that blocks their vision of what lies beyond it, maybe even of the truths that lie beyond it.

I prefer our vision, our window doesn't look out on a wall, rather the wall is part of its design. We're used to having windows in walls, but here the wall is in the window, which means you can see through the wall, which means the beauty of the wall enhances our view of what lies beyond it. Its stones and crevices and rainbow notes and variegated glass and the fact that it was made by the hands and hearts and imaginations and donations of members of our own community, all of those facts that contribute to its beauty also affect our view of the world outside it.

In this week's Torah portion, Emor, God gives us the fixed times of worship, and then tells us to proclaim them sacred, to make them holy days. ***Mo-adei Adonai asher tik'r'u otam: mikra-ei kodesh eleh heim, mo-a-dai.*** The fixed times of God, My fixed times, you shall proclaim them sacred occasions. [23:2]

The commentators ask, if they are God's chosen times, why do we have to declare them sacred? Aren't they already sacred by God's proclamation? And they answer, it takes both of us in partnership -- God and the people Israel together must set these times apart and declare them holy.

Perhaps the same sort of partnership is required not only to make our days holy, but also to make our texts and our stories sacred too. Perhaps it doesn't matter whether God wrote the Torah, nor whether the stories contained in it really happened, perhaps what matters is that we and God, working in partnership, can set these stories apart and declare them, not history, but holy . . . sacred.

And we do that not by arguing with one another about their veracity, nor by pulling the shades down over the windows on the world that these stories offer us, but rather by reading them together, and puzzling out their meanings, and using them to inspire us to create works of art and notes of music that in their turn inspire us to be better Jews, better human beings to one another and to the world they help us see and hear and understand.

The Zionist Labor Leader, Chaim Victor Arlosoroff [1899-1936] writing in the 1930s said: We are not defenders of the wall, but [we are] the wall itself, and each and every one of us is a living brick of this wall. [Leben und Werk, 1936, p. 184]

May we learn to be living bricks, each one of us lovingly holding our own rainbow note -- the prayers of our hearts -- each of us lovingly helping to hold up the whole retaining wall of Judaism, the foundation of all the sacred places, all the sacred stories, all the sacred truths, all the sacred lives contained within.

Shabbat shalom