

Drash on B'reshit (2000-10-27)

By David Fyffe

Beth Chayim Chadashim

Shabbat Shalom

This drash was to be one of celebration, my Chai year (18th) of being a Jew. I asked Rabbi Edwards if I could drash on B'reshit to celebrate my choice and my chosen Torah portion. But now I find myself rambling about philosophical questions that aren't ultimately answerable. The reason I am so troubled is that I have five people in my life who are very dear to me that are in varying stages of life-threatening conditions. Two of these have Alzheimers. The most immediate and troubling is my mother-in-law, Lois Ruth Hubbs. When I met her over five years ago, I was charmed by her. She was witty and fun. She was full of stories and word puns. Her teacher self was something that was always there, barely below the surface. One of the things that she changed or at least made me aware of was a particular phrase of mine that was and sometimes still is inaccurate. I usually take a nap in the afternoon because the medications make me exhausted. I would say, "I am going to lay down." Mom would reply with, "Where are you going to lay it?" I've learned much more from her than correct English usage, though. I've learned that each moment is as precious as platinum. I have learned that the end of all creation is dust, and the way to the end is littered with forgotten memories of things we do or have done. I hope that I have learned how to accept with an incredible amount of dignity whatever my station in life might be at any given moment; Lois Ruth has. Now, due to Alzheimers, more often than not she is not even able to put together a simple sentence, let alone a compound one. I have learned that Visiting the Sick (Bikur Cholim) is tikun olam. I have learned how difficult it is to be in the moment when your brain is screaming, "Get me out of here." When I see a mind so fogged that the spark of the divine is obscured, I often feel more anxious visiting the sick than standing up here before you. Why then would I put myself through something like that? It is simple; our tradition says that G-d visited Abraham when he was sick. It also says that G-d just simply sat there with him. But should our actions be like G-d?

I would like to share with you part of my spiritual journey, for most of my growth in the last eighteen years has come because of BCC. In spite of myself I have grown from a person with an almost infantile view of G-d to one that views G-d as the force of collective sparks that is the divine in all of creation. I will return to this idea later.

As some of you know, I am a Jew by choice. I finished my introduction to Judaism class on October 31, 1982. My ceremony was at Adat Ariel. I felt I was one of the most honored people there. There were about thirty people from BCC that had come to celebrate this joyous occasion with me. As I looked around, I saw that almost all eyes were on my group, and that they seemed to be asking the question, "Who is he?"

I had started this process two years before, in Ohio. My life partner, James Brooks, was incredibly sensitive and supportive. He made certain that, if I wanted to make a change, he was there for me, and that he honored my choice.

We made ready to move out here from spring of 1980 until summer of 1981. We sold almost all our belongings and planned our route here to Los Angeles. While in route, it happened that my turn to drive fell on Saturday. I had started Shabbat observance, together with not eating pork or shell fish, before the intro to Judaism class. James drove for me that day until sunset.

Here are some of the issues that I have struggled with over the years. It has been said that we make our own reality. I don't think this is so, at least not one hundred percent. Yet I do believe that choices that we and others make form our reality. In other words, our reality is formed by the actions, and their consequences, that we and others set into motion. I don't believe that we are totally predestined creatures. I do believe that genetics and physical being form a great part of our personality and that that part can only be changed by much hard work and continual behavior modification. So with all of this forming of a reality that each of us is doing, where does G-d fit into the big picture? I have often said that we are the hands, eyes, ears, and other physical attributes of G-d. Do I believe in a weakling G-d that can do nothing about our world, our existence? I have struggled with these questions for so long now that I have gone through many stages; from believing that, if you were able to pray hard enough, G-d would and could heal the person that you loved; to believing that the prayer for healing is more for the individual asking for the healing than for the person we hold up before the congregation. It is when we hold a person's name up before the congregation that it says, "I am hurting, Someone I love is sick, and so is my heart."

This week we meet the G-d of Creation. In weeks to come we will meet a G-d that hardens hearts, and then casts the man whose heart was hardened into the sea, drowning him and his troops. Some don't believe that Pharaoh was drowned at the reed sea, but rather was let live. It was just his troops that were cast into the sea. The G-d of creation is responsible for creating us in G-d's image. Yet it would appear G-d's image is flawed, which seems indefensible to me. Alzheimers, Alcoholism, Diabetes, AIDS; the list of diseases is so long. In this parshah we read about G-d looking at everything created and finding it good. But very soon, things go seriously wrong. The humans eat from the tree that G-d had forbidden to them, and G-d says, "Now they are like us, knowing good and bad." Why is this a problem for G-d? Is this in any way connected with the imperfect image we see? Perhaps some of this can be explained by the usage of three words used to connote the idea of creation. "Bara" is the second word of B'reshit, and it means "created", something that only G-d does. The other two words can be translated to mean "make" and "form", what we humans also do. So that could answer the question of whether or not we should be like G-d. The word translated "image" (tselem) is probably derived from the word tsel, "shadow". If we are but impotent shadows of G-d, does that excuse us from our task of Tikun Olam? Not at all. In fact, it makes it that much more important. According to tradition, the brokenness of the world occurred when G-d's presence entered into G-d's creation. Tikun Olam is precisely our task of putting it back together again.

I think that this poem says it more than any words of mine could. I have Fred Schuldiner, a past president of BCC, to thank for it, may his name and memory be for a blessing.

After a while you learn the difference, subtle difference, between holding a hand and chaining a soul,

And you learn that love doesn't mean leaning and company doesn't mean security.

And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts and presents aren't promises,

And you begin to accept your defeats with your head up and your eyes open, with the grace of an adult, not the grief of a child,

And you learn to build all your roads on today because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans.

After a while you learn that even sunshine burns if you get too much.

So plant your own garden and decorate your own soul, instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers,

And learn that you really can endure . . . that you really are strong, And you really do have worth.

Each of us does have worth but only when we remember that we are created in the image of the G-d of creation. To act in a manner that is not creation of good takes away from the dignity of G-d, not to mention our own. I think that is what I have learned in eighteen years, precious little when I look at the scope of possibilities.

I would like to invite you over the coming weeks and months to search with me and to talk with me about this drash and its questions. Perhaps, working together, we will be able to improve our understanding and to support one another even better.

Shabbat Shalom!