

10/15/04
Parashat Nolah

by Davi Cheng

Shabbat Shalom

First, a warm welcome and thank you to our special guest Lorri Jean for being with us tonight.

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Bracha and I would like to thank all of you too who are here tonight to celebrate ours and Les and Jerry's 25th anniversaries. Thank you to Les and Jerry for joining us in sponsoring tonight's Oneg, their 25th anniversary is later this month on October 27th. ◇

Earlier this year in the month of May, Barbara and Ruth celebrated their 25th, Mazel Tov to them again. I'm sure there will be more celebration of anniversaries on the way – including the celebration our Rabbi's 10th anniversary with BCC! ◇

BCC has been a place of inspiration, and a community filled with role-models for both Bracha and me. Just out of curiosity, can I ask all of you who have been in a committed relationship for 10 years or more to please stand? See, we have a room full of people – a few of you, like Maggie and Dave, and Bob and Topper have been together for more than 30 years! So thank you to all of you for showing us the way. ◇

In this week's Torah portion, Noach, beside the story of the famous flood, the ark, and the first appearance of the rainbow, was a short story on the Tower of Babel. [Genesis 11:1-9] ◇

“Now all the earth was of one language and one set-of-words” is the beginning of this story. People in this story were making bricks and building a city together. They have no problem agreeing with each other on what to do. They seemed to be working very well in harmony. They decided to make a name for themselves and build a tower into the heavens. But God didn't like what they were doing. So God came down, destroyed the tower, and scattered the people over the face of the earth. God also baffled their language, so that no one can understand his or her neighbor anymore.

I have always found this story so strange. Why would God do such a thing? Isn't it better when we can work in harmony? Wouldn't there be fewer wars and less violence in this world if we could understand each other and speak the same language?

It is interesting that our 25th anniversary landed in this Torah portion, because it got me thinking about the action of God scattering people around and creating different languages.

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Bracha and I met in 1979 at the end of our senior year at UC Berkeley. In the cafeteria of the International House — don't confuse it with the International House of Pancakes. The International House at Berkeley is a residence hall for students and visiting professors from around the world, and from the United States. <>

Bracha was a history major with a minor in business. When I met her, she had shoulder length frizzy blonde hair, and wore a big pair of eye glasses; always well-dressed with a nice shirt, pants, and leather clogs. She worked as the head of the classified Ads of the University Newspaper *Daily Cal* – by then she had already finished all her class requirements, written all her senior papers, and was just waiting to graduate. She already had her career in business all lined up. <>

I, on the other hand, was a biology major still trying to figure out what classes I needed to take in order to graduate. I had spent too much time the year before goofing around, competing on the Judo team, and playing in the marching band. So during my senior year, I was desperately trying to catch up on all the classes I have missed. Wearing an uneven page-boy hair cut – uneven because I used to cut my own hair; I was never well-dressed. I wore a grungy sweater, a pair of jeans with holes all over and dirty tennis shoes. Holes on my clothes not because I was poor, it was because I kept spilling sulfuric acid onto my clothes during chemistry labs. <>

Bracha and I couldn't be more different, we came from two opposite parts of the world. She spoke English, I spoke Chinese. She ate steaks and potatoes with a fork and a knife; I ate tofu and rice with a pair of chopsticks. We certainly did not speak the same language or use the same set-of-words. But I think it was the differences and diversity that attracted both Bracha and me to live at the International House. And it was our differences that attracted us to one another.

I think God scattered the people to make them different, so that there would be diversity and different voices. If we are all of the same voice and headed in the wrong direction, there would be no other voices there to stop us. By working to understand differences, we come to understand ourselves. And by understanding ourselves, we are then able to create loving relationships, and foster deeper and mutual appreciation for one another.

My love for you, Bracha, is deeper than ever. Thank you for bringing out the best in me. I am looking forward to the next 25 years with you.

I would like to end by reading an excerpt from my journal: this was written on Wednesday, October 23, 1996, when we first joined BCC.

This week I experienced love, nothing but love. Oct. 16 was our 17th anniversary, but it was the first time we celebrated in front of a community. Jeannette, (the romantic) arranged with Fran to have the Songs of Songs sung to me. We were invited to light the Shabbat candles. When we were up on the bimah, all I felt was love—love from Jeannette, and lots of love from everyone at BCC. Even though we are going through some difficulties in our life right now, that all vanished on Friday night. Standing up there, watching Fran and feeling love from everyone, I just know that things are going to be all right. It was such a great feeling. I went to bed with a smile and woke up the next day with a smile. What a powerful night that was; to be able to be who we are, just this little act of sharing our love with the community was very affirming. Most important though, spiritually, Jeannette and I are sharing together, something we have not done in the past, what a big difference!!