

Parashat Shemot

December 29, 2007

Drash by Cantorial Soloist Fran Chalin
and Rabbi Lisa Edwards

(Fran's last service at Beth Chayim Chadashim)

Fran: So back when I was asked to be BCC's cantorial soloist, no one asked me about God, about my relationship with God. Did I have one, how was it, did I believe, didn't I believe, what did I believe. I'm glad I wasn't asked because I wouldn't have known how to answer. I'm not sure I know how to answer it now.

Lisa: When I applied to HUC I was asked about God. I had the feeling they didn't ask everyone. So did the fact they were asking me have to do with their doubts about me? How is your relationship with God? Pretty good, I said, not that it's a very personal relationship, I don't think God spends too much time worrying about me, nor I about God, but I do believe in God . . . perhaps I should have added that I try to make sure God doesn't have to worry about me. But they were ready to move on to another topic . . .

Fran: It was very easy not to believe in the God of my growing up years, the one that my mother and father each gave me. Both of them were raised Orthodox in Brooklyn in the mid 30's. My grandmother, my mother's mother was 2 of 11 kids to survive WWII. As well, her husband died quite suddenly in 1945. In her family, God was judgmental, capable of making bad things happen on a dime, not very friendly, and one who didn't tolerate being questioned.

Lisa: Though I knew both my maternal grandparents and my mother and all of her five siblings, I don't remember ever talking to any of them about God. Although I do think my mother believed in God, I don't think she thought about it much, or prayed much either -- in her later years, after my brother and I were both rabbis, she'd say things like "that's your department, leave me out of it."

Fran: My father ran away from khader [Hebrew school], something his parents didn't know about for a couple of weeks. He left because he got smacked on the knuckles with a wooden ruler everyday for doing this that or the other thing. Of course, when he entered public school, those very same knuckles continued being smacked!

Lisa: That happened to my father too – only at cheder though – he loved public school! – once in awhile he'd reminisce about how the teacher smelled of herring!

Fran: But my dad's message to me was being a Jew has nothing to do with belief in God, it has to do with how you live your life, are you a mentch, do you fight for those who cannot fight for themselves? Not that God has nothing to do with Judaism, but doing what you were suppose to do was not to be linked with a belief in God, being a Jew meant you did what you were suppose to do.

...but, he added, will you remember to say kaddish for me when I die?

I left Judaism before the age of 15. Being raised in the conservative movement, there wasn't a feminine reference about people or God let alone a gender neutral name for God. I figured that it would be easier to stop being a Jew than to stop being female (remember, it was the 70's in NJ), so I left Judaism. I remained interested however in Jews and the history of the labor movement, Jews, and the history of healthcare, but Judaism and God, not so much! I even remember running into someone I knew at the beach on Yom Kippur and when they asked why I wasn't in Temple, I had no idea what day it was.

When I came out to myself 2 years later, I figured it was good that I wasn't invested in Judaism, because if there hadn't been any place for me in Judaism as a woman, there was bound to be less than no place for me as a lesbian. I never denied being Jewish, and had no wish to follow any other religion, but God and Judaism seemed destined to remain at arm's length.

Then I met other Jewish Lesbians who, after having reading the new lesbian anthology "Nice Jewish Girls", edited by Evelyn Torton-Beck, started asking questions like—if I'm made in God's image, then there has to be room in this religion for lesbian Jews, so let's start studying Judaism.

Lisa: Hey I was in that group – only it met in Iowa City. I was the only one in it who wasn't a lesbian . . . I mean who didn't yet acknowledge that she was a lesbian.

Fran: At around that time I also met Jewish people whose image of God was shaped by their involvement in 12 step programs such as Ala-non, AA, and OA. This was a God I had never met in Hebrew school, or in Shul. This was a forgiving loving compassionate God. I asked my mom, did she ever hear about this God, her response was, doesn't sound very Jewish!

So given my relationship with the Divine, it seemed odd to find myself in a vocation where God and I were likely to cross paths...on a regular basis!

Lisa: At one of my student pulpits – not BCC – I spoke about God and 12 step in my first sermon. One of the congregants came up to me after and said, ‘it’s going to be an interesting year.’ ‘oh, because I mentioned AA?’ I asked. ‘Because you mentioned God,’ she replied, ‘no one’s ever done that in a sermon before.’

Fran: When I started to study how children first relate to or think about God, it should be no surprise that children relate to God as a member of their family. More bossy to be sure than they might view a parent, but God is definitely a being that controls what happens similar to the marionette/puppeteer relationship. Given that most born Jews have little religious education beyond the age of 13, if they’ve had any at all, it makes sense that we enter adulthood continuing to see God in this capacity, as the one who makes things happen. Our prayers are answered or not because God saw fit to answer them.

Lisa: One of my colleagues talks about how odd it is that born Jews demand so much of ourselves when most of us stopped our Jewish education at the age of 13. Anything else we want to do or be, he says, we happily pursue adult training in – we want to be a doctor or lawyer, we go to medical or law school; we want to learn to ski, we take lessons; but Judaism somehow we expect to come to fully formed. And then we make it worse by attending services only once or twice a year – and not just any service -- High Holy Day services – with all their complicated liturgy and theology. No wonder we only go once a year – each time we walk out feeling like failures. And the one thing most Jews are not used to being is a failure.

Fran: Isn’t it amazing how we define failure!? Where is it written that a relationship with the Divine was supposed to be divine?? Perhaps one of the reasons that folks find the God they meet through 12 step programs accessible is because they are being introduced to God when they are at their very worst, by others who have been at their worst as well. It takes the pressure off, especially if one believes that we have to be at our best when we encounter God. In a 12 step program it’s acceptable to come as you are, then–once you accept the premise that you are entitled to a relationship with God–the idea of a relationship becomes much less daunting.

Lisa: One could reasonably argue – some do – that of all the humans in Torah, Moses has the closest relationship to God. Not that Abraham didn’t, or Noah, or any number of others – but for 40 years Moses and God were intimates, in presumably daily communication, though some of us might argue that God didn’t treat Moses all that well (like that Moses got to lead the whiny Israelites through the desert for 40 years, only to get shut out of the Promised Land himself). But if you doubt the closeness of God and Moses you have only to skip ahead to the Book of

Numbers in which God Godself describes the relationship between God and Moses in this way: “Moses is trusted throughout my household. [Only] with Moses do I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and [only] he beholds the likeness of God [hwhy]” [Numbers 12:7-8]; or the way the very end of Torah describes their relationship, saying about Moses: “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses who God knew face-to-face [panim el panim]” [Deuteronomy 34:10].

But though God and Moses were undeniably close – they weren’t always that way. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, though we meet Moses when he is a tiny baby, Moses doesn’t meet God until he is 80 years old! That’s right – 80 years old!! [Exodus 7:7]

And did Moses and God hit it off right away? You tell us – In this week’s Torah portion – Sh’mot – as we begin the Book of Exodus, we see the moment when God chooses Moses: One day while Moses is shepherding his father-in-law’s flock, he comes to the Mountain of God, to Horeb where an angel of God appears to him in a fire’s flame from inside a bush. And he looked, and here: the bush was burning in the fire, and the bush was not consumed! And Moses said, ‘Let me turn aside and see this great sight. Why doesn’t the bush burn? And God saw that Moses turned to see. And God called to him from inside the bush, and said, ‘Moses, Moses.’

And Moses said, ‘hineni. I am here.’

AFTER some more chat on God’s part, God says, ‘now go, and I’ll send you to Pharaoh, and bring out my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt.’

Which prompts Moses in 5 different ways to try to get out of this assignment, but eventually he gives in. Saying something like the biblical equivalent of “whatever,” “Moses goes va-yei-lech Moshe,” [Ex. 4:18 and 4:13, see Friedman’s comment on that verse, p. 182 of his commentary] Thus with a fairly long and argumentative first encounter, we receive our first impression of what will someday become Judaism’s best example of a close relationship between a human being and God.

Fran: Why do we never use God and Moses’s relationship as the proof that all relationships require a TON of work?! I would contend that one of the reasons we walk away from relationships with each other is also this notion of if it takes this much work, I must be doing it wrong, or doing it with the wrong person.

Lisa: Why did God pick Moses? Why did God need a human partner at all, let alone one who turned out to be so reluctant? Well, it may not surprise you to know that our sages arrived at no agreement about why God picked Moses in particular. And that is surely part of the point: the Torah comes to tell us that, after the first week of creation anyway, God always operates through the human realm, anywhere that God takes a hand at all. And it also comes to tell us that there is no perfect human being out there to do the work – if it’s going to get done it, it will be done

imperfectly by imperfect people who need a lot of help along the way. And Jewish tradition – in myriad ways -- says to us: don't be waiting around to be told the who or how or when or where - the who is you...and me, the how is anyway we can, the when is now...and more tomorrow, the where is everywhere, for nowhere in the world is free from a need for healing...certainly not this year, and not likely next year either. [from lisa's post tsunami, end of year, sh'mot drash 2004]

Fran: When I approached Lisa with the idea of talking about God, she asked what drew me to this topic, (my own burning bush?) I realized that my relationship with God had indeed changed since my beginnings at BCC, but the reason it's changed has little to do with me alone.

Back in the 80's in Phila, left to my own devices as a woman and as a lesbian I don't think I would have taken on the task of exploring Judaism let alone checking out God. It was far less scary to say there's no room for me at this inn, (deference to our non Jewish attendees this evening) then to try to claw my way in. Had it not been for the bold certainty of the women in my group, women who said, of course we belong here, we too are made in God's image, and we have the responsibility of learning just why we do belong, I would never have risked it. As Lauren Schlau recently put it, it takes more than a village, it takes the village people.

Working here at BCC, being your advocate, infused me with the responsibility to work as defender of our right as GLBT and progressive Jews to partner with God.

Actually, you created a monster because it was that same responsibility that made me know that I, as an out bisexual, belonged at BCC, even if the letterhead in those days proclaimed that this was only a shul for gay and lesbian Jews.

You, BCC, were the impetus behind my exploring just what being in a relationship with the Divine could encompass, You were the ones who made me stop and say, as Moses did, I must turn aside and see this marvelous sight, or as we would say at BCC, I must turn aside and see this faaabulous sight!

You were the ones who made me realize over and over again that the ground on which we are standing together is indeed holy ground. You have all been faces of the Divine for me, and for this, you will always have my heart.

Shabbat Shalom