

Parshat Tezavveh (Purim)
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March 10, 2006

Shabbat Shalom,

I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable because what I'm going to say is a little more serious, so I'm going to put my hair down for this. (Take off payez)

Tonight is the Shabbat before the silly holiday of Purim, it is called Shabbat Zakhor – the word Zakhor means “remember”. At this Shabbat, we are to read the special Torah portion in Deuteronomy to remind ourselves what God said about the Amalek, the bad guys:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Egypt — how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when Adonai your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that Adonai your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Exclamation Mark)
[Deuteronomy 25:17-19]

Don't forget to blot out the memory of Amalek! God commanded. We are reminded of this because as we read the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther on Purim – (which will be on Monday night here at BCC), Haman, the enemy in the Migillah, is said to be a direct descendant of the Amalekites. Somehow, Amalek has become a name we use to represent the ultimate enemy of Jews for all ages. Think for a moment, do you have enemies in your life? Who are your enemies? Who is our Amalek? Keep that thought in mind, I'll get back to this later. Earlier, in mid-February, Bracha and I went up to Berkeley to attend a four-day conference put on by Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue), the International Think Tank for multicultural Jews. This was my fourth year in attending. It was great to reacquaint with old friends from across the globe, and to meet new ones.

This year there were about 65 of us with 25 or so newcomers. Imagine all of us Jews, ranging from secular to orthodox, with different languages, religious practice, and cultural backgrounds, gathered in one place for four days. We ate meals together, we davened together, and we kibbitzed together. How should I describe this experience? ... like an Outward bound weekend to build team spirit in the wilderness, except we were in a hotel? This conference was an Inward bound weekend. We spent the entire four days in a hotel having dialogue on how to build communication among our communities. We tackled many difficult topics such as our Jewish identity and how it is being recognized by others. We also discussed issues of racism, anti-Semitism, and inter-denominational conflicts. Our goal was to find out what steps we could take as diverse Jews to build bridges to one another, to create a community of Jews with respect for pluralism.

To give you an idea of the kind people I was sitting next to during this conference: (Show photo of Dele Jane Osawe) – This is Dele Osawe, (by the way, this is not a Purim costume). I met Dele

Osawe during my first year at the conference when I had doubts whether she was Jewish. As it turned out, Mrs. Osawe is an Ibo Jew from Nigeria. She is the first woman to be elected to political office in her district; she was made a chief in her village, and was honored by the Nigerian royalty with the title “Odozi-Ani” which means “one who repairs the land”. She is the founder of numerous social service programs, foundations and organizations in both United States and Africa. The list goes on and on and on...

(photo of Ephraimi Issac) This is Dr. Ephraim Isaac – again, not a Purim costume – I met Dr. Isaac during my second year at the conference. Knowing that he is a Yemenite, Ethiopian Orthodox Jew, I respectfully kept my distance from him thinking that he wouldn’t want to speak to a lesbian. Then, out of necessity, I took the only empty seat in front of him on the charter bus, as we headed off to dinner one evening. During the bus ride he tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Li how ma?” and greeted me in Chinese. The rest was history, we now hug and kiss when we meet. Dr. Isaac holds a Bachelor’s degree in Philosophy, Chemistry and Music, a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages, a Master of Divinity, and other honorary degrees. He is a Fellow at the Dead Sea Scrolls foundation, Director of the Institute of Semitic Studies, and this and that and that...I just don’t have time to tell you all that he is. He knows seventeen languages, and is forever working on peace and conflict resolution. This year, on our way back to the airport, I just happened to sit in front of him in the shuttle. Again, he tapped me on my shoulder and said, “Did I ever sing to you in Chinese?” he then proceeded to sing the entire communist Mao Tzu Tung anthem in perfect Mandarin and pitch.

(Photo of Rabbi Elisha Salas) Lastly, this is Rabbi Elisha Salas – an Orthodox Rabbi from Portugal. This was his first time attending the Think Tank. He spoke very little English. Our first evening together as a group was Friday night Shabbat dinner. Things didn’t go as planned because Rabbi Salas stood up and just took over, and led an entire Orthodox evening service – this was AFTER a woman rabbi from a Renewal movement just finished her shortened version. Tensions continued to build on Shabbat morning, when Rabbi Salas and other men walked out of the room when women were called to the Torah. By lunch time, Gary Tobin, founder of the Think Tank finally spoke up and said, “We are Be’chol Lashon – It means In Every Tongue. A bracha (blessing) is a bracha, whether it is said by a man or a woman, Reform or Orthodox. In this room, no Jew is above another Jew. So if we want to work together in this Think Tank, we must respect each other’s practices”. Rabbi Salas, through an interpreter then apologized for his behavior during the minyan. He continued to say, that there will be things he may never get or understand, but he will try his best to listen with the hope that someday, he will. Upon hearing that, I quickly decided that my relationship with Bracha, my love, is probably one of those things that this Rabbi may never get or understand; so I labeled him as one of those Orthodox Rabbi who would never change his ways. For the next two days, we had workshops together, and partly because of the language barrier, I never even tried to speak to him. So the Think Tank came and went. It was time to leave. Standing in the lobby waiting for our airport shuttles, we said our goodbyes. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rabbi Salas walking towards me in his black coat and his black hat. He looked me in the eyes, smiled and said, “Davi”, and then he offered his hand for me to shake. I was in awe as I shook his hand and I wished him a safe trip home. He said, “Toda” and we parted. Who knew! And was I wrong!

Now going back to my earlier question, who are your enemies? Our Amelak? As I have learned, and am reminded from year after year at the Think Tank, that my enemies, my Amelak is not what I see. My Amelak is inside of me, it is my biases, prejudices, and my quickness to judge people. How often do we put certain people in a box, and label them as our enemies before we know them? Maybe it was the Israelites' own bias and prejudice that prevented them from waiting for the stragglers in the back, exposing them to the attack. Maybe this is what God really means, don't forget to blot out the memory of bias, prejudice, and quick judgment from under the heavens. Tonight, I hope that my new friend Rabbi Salas is in Portugal telling his congregants to blot out their biases and prejudices, from under the heavens too. Wouldn't our world be a better place if we all do that? Now in honor of Rabbi Salas, I'm going to put my hair back up. (put on payez)

Happy Purim and Shabbat Shalom.