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Edah Happenings:

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna on "Judaism as an Art Form" And Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Woolf on "Religious Zionism: From Crisis to Renwal?"
Feb. 15, 22, March 1, 8 @ JCC in NYC

Jewish Town Hall: The Shidduch Crisis
Feb. 20 @ JCC in NYC

The Song of the Sea: Theme and Variations

By Judy Klitsner

In Parashat Beshalach, the Song of the Sea is presented twice. First—though others join him-- Moshe sings as an individual: "I will sing--*ashira* (Ex. 15:1-2)" Next is Miriam's song, and a call for communal recitation: "Sing-- *shirul* (Ex. 15:21)!" This new song heralds a transition from the individual to the community, a process that begins early in the exile narrative.

True to the promise of its title, the Book of Shemot begins with a list of names, the individuals that comprise the fully constructed household--*bayit*-- of Israel. But almost immediately the book of names becomes a chronicle of the nameless (Ex. 1: 6-14), as the institution of slavery sets in and the *bayit* begins to crumble.

To incite toward de-legitimization of his guest population, Pharaoh employs an insidious linguistic technique: "Come let us deal shrewdly with *him* (*lo*) (Ex. 1:10)." By using plural pronouns for the Egyptians and singular for the Israelites, he assigns diversity--three dimensional vitality-- to his own people, while attributing a soulless monolithic nature to the foreigners.

The Midrash assigns an added dimension to Pharaoh's evil plot: he uses the singular to refer not to the Israelites, but to the Israelite God-- let us deal shrewdly with Him. By removing the spark of individuality--the *tzelem Elokim*-- that resides within each person, setting them apart from all others (Mishnah Sandhedrin 4,6), the Egyptians plot to "deal shrewdly" with their God; to create an unbridgeable chasm between humanity and the divine. As Buber writes: "Not before a man... in finding himself--can say 'I,' can he...to God--say 'Thou.'" Heschel cites the Hassidic rebbe who, after failing to appear at morning prayers, explains: "When I woke up this morning, I began to say the prayer "*modeh ani lefanecha* (I am grateful before You)." But I could not move beyond the word "*ani*." If I do not sufficiently understand who I am, if I have no strong sense of my *ani*, how could I possibly turn outward toward God, to a *lefanecha*?"

The Egyptians sought to deal cleverly with the Israelites by erasing their names and their identities and--by logical extension-- precluding any possible relationship with their God. And in fact, in the first chapter of Shemot, God Himself disappears along with named characters.

Suddenly, the pattern changes: "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one *named* Shiphrah and the other *named* Puah (1:15)." By refusing to conform to their society's evil dictates, these women are rewarded with names, thus heralding the return of the individual to the Book of Names.

The midwives are described as '*Ivriyot*-- Hebrews;' but are they Hebrew midwives or Egyptian midwives to the Hebrews? The ambiguity is intentional; the term "*Ivri*" is meant as a description of character and not ethnicity. Whether Hebrew or Egyptian, these women followed in the footsteps of Abraham the original *Ivri*-- the morally intrepid individualist, who, as the midrash explains positioned himself on one side (*b'ever echad*), while all the world was on the other (*b'ever sheni*).

Significantly, God enters the narrative together with the reintroduction of names. Once the people are capable of locating the "I" within them, they are engaged by a "Thou."

As the narrative continues its tale of defiant women, Pharaoh decrees that all male Israelite babies must be killed. He lets the daughters live, presumably because they pose no threat to his regime. Following his proclamation, the term "*bat*--daughter" appears seven times in rapid, ironic succession, highlighting the error in Pharaoh's assumption. Although daughters pose no military threat, their moral force sets them apart as truly dangerous. Of all the "daughters" who undermine him, the most surprising is Pharaoh's own daughter, who, acting as an "*Ivri*," thwarts her father's genocidal efforts.

Rav Soloveitchik extols the virtues of the lone, conscience-driven individual: "Lonely man is a courageous man; he is a protester; he fears nobody; whereas social man is a compromiser, a peacemaker and at times a coward. At first man had to be created *levado*, alone; for otherwise he would have lacked the courage or the heroic quality to stand up and to protest, to act like Abraham who took the ax and shattered the idols which his own father had manufactured."

The Rav proceeds to describe the transition from individual to community: "However, man was created a second time... Man is not only a protester; he is an affirmer, too... If man always felt remote from everybody and everything, then the very purpose of creation could not be achieved." ("The Community," Tradition, Spring 1978)

How does this transition occur? The first passage-- from undifferentiated mass to individual--was initiated by heroic women. Acting as faithful architects, they cautioned that a sound Israelite *bayit* could be built only if each individual pillar were strong enough to do its part in supporting the whole.

The next transition-- from individual to community--is again enacted by women, this time at the Song of the Sea. Now assuming the role of musical conductor, a woman teaches the people to sing a familiar song in a new way. The song of the individual--with all its fluctuations and variations--must now include a recognizable theme. The whole composition could now be sung by each unique individual, in perfect unison.

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Conviction Without Fanaticism

by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

If I could make everyone in our world read one text, and really take it to heart, it would not be the Shma, or any other section of the Bible. It would not be a selection from the Mishnah, the Talmud, or any subsequent rabbinic writing. Although I am an Orthodox rabbi, the text I would choose would be Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

If you pushed me, I would settle for twelve words from that address: "with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right".

Here's why I think Lincoln's words are so important. The major threat to world peace today is fanaticism. Abroad, we face enemies who are genuinely willing to die if only they can kill us first. Fanatic nationalisms and tribal hatreds led to genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans, and are fueling attempted genocide in Darfur today. And of course, there is fanaticism as well within the Jewish community... (You may want to fill that one in yourself).

Fanaticism has always been a powerfully malignant force. Fanatic communists kept much of the human race oppressed, and murdered millions, before the Berlin Wall was finally toppled. Fanatic nationalism and anti-Semitism engineered the Holocaust. Suicide bombing of civilians is a genuinely new tactic, but "kamikaze" has been a word in English since the 1940s.

Many contemporary thinkers believe that the proper response to fanaticism is relativism. In other words, they believe that the way to fight fanatics and fanaticism is to deny the possibility of genuine conviction. Peace and tranquility will come when each person understands that they have no more chance of being right than anyone else.

In a utopian world, perhaps everyone would be convinced, and this response might work. But practical strategies have to work in our world. This means that they need to work even if not everyone buys into them. Fanaticism will always be with us. Rather than fantasizing that we can eliminate it entirely, we need to be able to respond to it effectively,

Relativism can diminish fanaticism, but if even one fanatic survives in a relativistic world, he or she will soon be running it. Relativists can't plausibly fight, as they don't know with confidence that the aggressor is wrong. And as Edmund Burke compellingly argued, "All that is required for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing".

There is a middle ground between fanaticism and relativism, and

we desperately need to find it, because we need to fight our enemies with all the power at our disposal - but without turning into them. There is a way to tell a fanatic off without being a fanatic oneself, and to resist fanatic terrorists without unleashing our own terror. Lincoln's words are a luminous beacon guiding us to that way. "With firmness in the right" - effective resistance to fanatics can only come from those who have deep-seated convictions, to the point that they willingly risk their lives in defense of those ideals. How are these resistance fighters to be distinguished from those they are fighting? "As God gives us to see the right" - even as we act on the basis of our best perception of the truth, we need to be fully aware of the possibility that we are erring.

Lincoln's formulation can be seen as a reformulation of a key rabbinic dictum. According to the Talmud, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued for three years as to whose positions would have legal force in Judaism. Ultimately, a heavenly voice emerged and said: "These and those are the words of the living God - but the law follows the House of Hillel". The recognition that there is truth on both sides does not mean that one cannot choose between them, and choosing one side does not require one to dismiss the other as baseless.

The Talmud goes further, and says that the House of Hillel merited having the law follow then because "they were pleasant and forbearing, and taught the words of the Shammaites together with their own - even placing the words of the Shammaites before their own". In other words, the House of Hillel never saw their own positions as infallible, or stopped learning from their opponents. In several recorded cases, they were convinced by the Shammaites and reversed their positions. But none of this stopped them from championing their own positions with all the vigor at their command.

Lincoln's words, which echo the sentiments of our sages, enable us to act with conviction without having to believe that we are infallible. They allow us to make judgments and act on them, without requiring us to ignore inconvenient facts, and thus they leave open the possibility of reversing our judgments in the light of new evidence. They enable us to use force against our enemies when necessary, without requiring us to dehumanize them.

This Lincoln's Birthday, I urge everyone to read the Second Inaugural and take its message to heart. Take the time to examine your convictions, and to make sure that they result from admirable motives and adequate understanding. That done, we should proceed with malice toward none, with charity toward all, and with firmness in the right - as God give us to see the right.

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