

Pride and Prejudice
Parashat Sh'mini
March 21, 2014

On a subway in New York City, sometime in the 1930's, two friends encounter one another, find a seat, and settle down. After catching up, each one pulls out a newspaper. The first one is reading the *Forvertz*, the Jewish Daily Forward, the Yiddish voice of progressive workers and a bridge between the old world and the new. But the second passenger is reading something else. The second one is reading *Der Sturmer*, the German-language weekly put out by the Nazi party! The first one gapes and asks "what are you doing? How can you read that trash?" The second one replies: "Look, in your paper we Jews are in trouble. We get kicked out of one country, persecuted in another, husbands abandon their wives and workers aren't paid enough. It's all so depressing. But according to this? We're doing so much better! Apparently, we own all the banks, we control the culture, we run the world!"

Almost always, there is more than one way of looking at the world.
And to some extent, we have a choice in what we see.

This week's Torah portion presents, towards the end, the first detailed elaboration of the laws of kashrut, of keeping kosher, the unique dietary system of Judaism. It doesn't deal with separate dishes – that's really from the Talmud not the Bible. And it doesn't deal with how animals are to be handled – that's hinted at in Genesis and developed further by the rabbis of a later era.

But it does present which animals we are, traditionally, allowed to eat, and which ones we are not.

It is all very detailed, except for one thing. Nothing at all is said about why we are to do this. No reason is given. With explanation absent, speculation blooms.

Some of the answers seem forced or too convenient by half: oh, there is something in the character of the crab or the behavior of the pig that we are not supposed to imitate – okay, fine, but does that also apply to a rabbit? Or: well, back then they just didn't know how to cook things right, but now we do. Our Reform movement is completely comfortable with the choice not to keep kosher, but those two explanations seem... unconvincing.

But here are two that hold, and they present different world views in and of themselves. One approach says that there is something spiritual here, that by looking at the world and saying that not everything is a resource for us to exploit, not everything around us is there for our consumption... it is a lesson in humility and perspective and limitation. The line could, in the argument, be almost anywhere, but the fact that there is a line is an important lesson for us all.

The other approach argues that this is not spiritual, but tribal – that if we cannot eat with others, it will set us apart, and keep us distinct. This is about separation, and identity.

To lift us up, or to hold ourselves apart. To inspire, or to exclude. That is the choice in our hands. That is, in this portion, two different ways we can choose to look at the world.

With the cold weather this past week – and God help us, predictions for more snow still in the week to come – with the cold weather came a chill wind, and echoes of what was the Cold War. Even acknowledging Russian historic interest in a warm-water port and previous sovereignty over the area in question, the conflict over Crimea is an all-too familiar tale: intervention to prevent oppression of an ethnic minority, oppression real in some instances but also imaginary, or deliberately exaggerated for political purposes. An assertion of power based on unification of a distinct national group.

There is a specter haunting Europe, and even in an age of integration and globalization, where in the night clubs of any European city you can meet anyone from anywhere in the world dancing to the beat of shared sound and an international youth culture, yet, still, even there, even there the question lingers from the very dawn of the nation-state: what does it mean to belong? Who is in and who is out and how and why? What is a country? Is it a home for all who find themselves in its boundaries, or is it a vehicle for the cultural expression of the majority? Or both?

But it is not just Europe, and it is not just now. The question has been with us for a long time. In Jewish tradition there is the Ezra-strand, and the Ruth-strand... the tribal and the more universal, the inward looking and the

upward and open one. Ezra the scribe focused on the purity of the stock, the ethnic character of the country he encountered. Ruth the Moabite was welcomed within a space of shared ethics, and the embrace of a shared future, even without a common past. Which is primary? The pull of the group, or the power of what we stand for? Granted, both are important. But which comes first?

In the Middle Ages, in the *Kuzari* -- which touches on some of the same geographical territory in dispute in the Ukraine today -- Judah HaLevi seems to have written a profoundly racist book. He has a Jewish teacher describe the world to a pagan king as consisting of minerals, vegetables, animals, human beings and Jews... with Jews being a different kind of being, a different species. Only Jews, says this teacher, are capable of prophecy.

What a celebration of the power of the clan! What a way of making us feel better about ourselves – and the book is subtitled, in fact, “In Defense of a Despised Faith.”

And yet, and yet... Step back and look at the work again, and there are two twists that tell a totally different tale. First, Jews are the only ones who are capable of receiving prophecy? But the only figure who has a prophetic vision in this work.. is the king, not the Jewish teacher! And Jews are a different species? But the point of the book is that – a historically accurate detail – the entire kingdom of the Khazars converted to Judaism. En masse. If we are really a different species, how would that be possible? Thus the seemingly

chauvinistic message is undermined by a careful read of the book itself, by stepping back, by not assuming that the Jewish teacher as a character totally represents the intent and views of the profoundly subtle Jewish author. What the character teaches about Judaism is not... what the book teaches, taken as a whole. The message may be far more open than it seems. And it is up to us which message we walk away with.

Think about something you do, in your own Jewish life. Think about why you do it. It may be a Passover seder. It may be lighting a menorah on Chanukah. It may be being involved in a cause, to make the world more fair. It may be visiting Israel, or supporting the synagogue. Think about the reasons you do this. Are they about content, or cohesion? About the ethnic, or the ethic? About what we might call the task or the group?

Think, too, about something you do not observe, a custom you do not keep. Why, or why not? What puts you off, or turns you away?

Living in a majority non-Jewish culture, Jewish life makes us... and marks us... as something that is separate, and different. Being different is... well, different. And describing the difference does involve... making distinctions. But different doesn't have to be better, or worse. Sometimes it can be just... different.

My goal, my hope...is that in what we do, and why we do it, we can come to a place of pride without prejudice, of embracing an act or an idea because of what it is for, not who it is against.

There are ample examples, within the Jewish tradition, of living with difference. But to conclude, tonight, I turn to an American experience, rather than just a Jewish one.

Once, years ago, in a different city, with a different composition, I was asked to offer the benediction at the induction ceremony for new citizens. The minister giving the invocation, as I feared, delivered a prayer that was particular to his own tradition and which – as I looked around the room at the Soviet Jews, the Cambodian refugees, the Sudanese Muslims becoming new Americans – applied to well under half of the people who were there at that moment. I gave as broad and universal a benediction as I could. But afterwards, a Middle-Eastern man approached me and grabbed my hand: “You, Jew!” he said, in what I soon realized was broken English rather than an accusation. “I, Muslim. I from Cairo. Jews from Israel. There we fight. Here we can be friends.”

I know you join me in hope and prayer that “there we fight” is something we can put behind us. But I was touched, nonetheless, by this American model. People can be very different. And also true to themselves. But even so, if we choose to look at the world this way, if we want it and will it and work for it, even so, here we can be friends.

Shabbat Shalom.