

**“Have you not one blessing for me?”**  
**Towards a dialectic of pluralism**  
**as an ideal in itself**  
***Parashat Toledot***  
**November 28, 2003**

Happy Black Friday. And welcome, this weekend, to the beginning of “the holiday season.” The message comes across in so many different ways. The pace of activity picks up; it seems as if the very fate of the capitalist enterprise hangs in the balance. The landscape changes before our eyes; we see so many of our friends and neighbors fight the darkness of the night with neon, or flashing or decorative lights. December creeps closer. And we are face to face once again, we American Jews, with what seems like an eternal question: who are we, in this land of ours? What are we doing here? How do we relate to the world around us? Is it a season unto itself? Or is it, really, a reflection of a deeper reality? Is this month before us perhaps in fact just like the rest of the year, only more so?

*“Vayit’rotz’zu ha’banim b’kir’ba, vatomer: ‘im kein, lamah zeh anochi?’* And the children struggled within her, so that she said: ‘If so, why am I?’ *Vayomer Adonai lah: ‘Sh’nai goyim b’vitneich, ush’nai l’eumim mimayayich yipareidu...’* And the Eternal said unto her: “Two nations are in your womb, and two manner of peoples shall be separated from you.”

We read this week the story of a struggle, and a question of identity. In Rebecca’s womb are not mere twins. Twins in literature, in

any event, are always something more than themselves as individuals, and something less; they are meant to represent sides of something, and thus must be seen as both paradigms of a larger ideal and simultaneously inherently deficient in the traits possessed by the other. In Rebecca's womb are nations, and peoples, and a struggle that originates in her time, but which will transcend time. Our forebears saw in the Torah an archetypal text, tales not only of one generation but a shadow history of the future. The Torah is not just about them, and then. It is about us, and now. Life is a circle. And what happened to our ancestors, the medieval mystical scholar Nachmanides tells us, will happen to us as well.

I can just see the images from Joni Mitchell. We are trapped, indeed, on a carousel of time. What was is, and what is yet to be has already been: conflict and competition, struggle and pain, agony to the point of questioning why we are here at all. Can there not be a better model for our time than this image of eternal wrestling?

Jacob has just departed. Enter Esau, with the game cooked, and the expectation of supremacy. His right, his due, his place in the natural order of the world. But the game is up, and Isaac, realizing now if he did not know it all along that Jacob has tricked the incrementally older brother, shrugs as if to say: the words have left my lips, the blessing has a power of its own, there is nothing more I can do. Esau, distraught, pleads with his father. The words are a testimony of raw emotion, and

perhaps the most intense honesty we confront anywhere in the entire TaNakh: “*Kishmoah Esav et divrei Aviv, vitzak ta’akah g’dolah u’marah ad me’od. Vayomer: ‘Barcheini gam ani aviv!*” When Esau heard the words of his father, he shouted out a great and bitter shout. And he said: ‘Bless me, too, father!’ *Vayomer Esav el aviv: ‘ha’berakha akhat hu lecha, aviv?’* And Esau said unto his father: ‘Have you but one blessing, my father?’”

Listen to the words. They are a cry from the heart, a plea for existential acceptance that comes from the very core of Esau’s being. 1.

I submit to you that this heartfelt demand for more than one parental blessing, this seemingly simple notion of an equality of love and acceptance, by direct implication an acknowledgement of more than one divine blessing, and more than one path to God, this idea has taken a long, long time to work itself out. And as the idea of diversity has taken so many centuries to emerge in answer to the basic questions posed so long ago in this week’s portion, still we are not sure what to do, any of us, with those we consider to be the “other.” Is our goal tolerance? Is it acceptance of differences? Or will we be able to embrace each other beyond those differences, and see, each one in the other, a reflection of ourselves? The separated twin, with whom we struggled in the womb.

One of the greatest interests in my rabbinate, in my professional life, has been the great dialogue between faiths that is opening up in our generation. There have been times, I confess – this is hard to admit, and

it does not at all apply to this moment, or this area, but there have been times when I have felt far closer to the members of the Ministerial Alliance than I have to my colleagues on a Board of Rabbis. There is excitement in the realization that we are making more progress together in this generation, we practitioners of different traditions, than happened in the entire preceding two thousand years. And in my neighborhood, on our street and the one next to us, of eight houses in a row, there are seven different religions. In order, we have Muslims, Armenian Orthodox Christians, Hindus, British Catholics, our house, Buddhists, more Jews, and some minority called American Protestants. At this place, at this moment in history we are witness to something utterly unique: the ease with which we all get along with each other.

What seems so natural now in the relationship between individuals grows a bit more complicated when we look at the delicate dance between traditions. We make progress, but the nature of the dialog remains sometimes unclear. Is it a social agenda? Is our Jewish interest in it primarily the diminution of anti-Semitism? Or in coming together, are we able to talk about God? Are we there to challenge yesterday, and out of our own self-interest? Or are we open to be challenged ourselves, and to self-growth?

**What I seek is a dialectic of pluralism not merely as an accommodationist agenda for survival in a multifaceted society, but as an expression of diversity as an ideal state of being. What I want**

**to establish in the interaction of traditions is a faith-based foundation which views pluralism as more than a forced attempt to make a virtue of necessity, but as a good and a goal in and of itself.**

**My friends, even with the ongoing rise of fundamentalism in the world today, even with our collective descent into nationalism and unilateralism on the political scene, even with the apparent polarization into competing civilizations we seem to see in the daily news, I still believe that we can be part of a world more coming together than it is falling apart. And I believe we must continue to “push the envelope” in examining how we look at both ourselves, and the “other.”**

**Just think for a moment, first of all, of the faces we see now, when we look in our own mirror.** Who do we see today, that we might not have seen, or noticed in the past? Still issues for the most traditional of Jews, in our community nevertheless we take for granted the presence, the power, and the voices of women. We open our arms to new Jews – one out of every 30 Jews in this country at this time was not born Jewish – and to those whose lives and love are linked with this Jewish family. We work now to welcome gays and lesbians into a Jewish life that was closed off to so many of us just a short while ago. Our own Religious School is becoming a veritable United Nations of faces, and a member of our congregation will soon be sending out an invitation for a

multi-racial Chanukah celebration, hoping to bring together the numerous families in our congregation with African-American, East Asian, Indian and Hispanic members, whether they came to those families through adoption or interracial marriage.

When asked to think of a Jew in your mind, it is still the case that many people envision a bearded, black-hatted Orthodox man. And it is still the case, as it was a decade ago, that most synagogues in this country do most of their programming for a particular family: it is a family of a Jewish man, who was born a man, and born Jewish, married to a Jewish woman, who was born a woman, and born Jewish, each married for the first time, with their own natural, biological children. That family... that family for whom we do so much of our programming... that family represents 18% of our community.

Who are we, and who is the “other?” First of all, when we look in the mirror we wake up and realize that that which once was separate and foreign is not so far away. Immigration is not just a matter of national borders. It is also a question of our own communal boundaries. Some are sacrosanct. Some are porous. And all I know is that we do not look the way we once did. That increasingly, and indeed, we are the world. And there is a question that the Torah itself will confront in just a couple of weeks, as Jacob leaves, and then returns home to the land of Israel, and wrestles with... something. And it is not clear if what he is wrestling with is out there, or himself.

**Secondly, in struggling with borders, and what we might call our “foreign affairs,” we are not alone. It has been in our generation, as well, that many of the mainstream Christian traditions amongst whom we live have reexamined their own relationship between themselves and the other. And for Christians, clearly, that means a reexamination of that which they now realize they were once part of. For “them,” the first and quintessential “other” is “us.”**

Many of you by now have heard of the work by a former Catholic priest named James Carroll called *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and The Jews*. Carroll traces the history of the Roman Catholic relationship with Jews and Judaism, and boldly calls for a Third Vatican Council to essentially revise the New Testament, to purge it of what he sees as its inevitable anti Jewish taint.

Carroll’s book is a good read, and an important work. But I am equally impressed with a shorter and less-well known, but perhaps equally important book by a scholar named Mary Boys. Written especially for Catholic educators at all levels, she calls not so much for a reformulation of the Christian Scripture as a radical re-understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. She opens with the image from centuries of art, of Ecclesia and Synagoga, Church and Synagogue, with the former triumphant and the latter defeated. She

outlines an incessant and she argues ongoing Christian supercessionism, and attacks the replacement theology that she asserts still haunts the halls and lurks in the hearts of many Catholic education systems. She calls for a new relationship, one of sibling equality, of love and of interaction. And she calls her book, after this week's portion, after the cry of Esau and his longing for love... "Has God Only One Blessing?"

But Boys' book is not just for Christians. Her conclusion is something we can all learn from. She ends her books stating that "In our time, Ecclesia's dialogue with Synagoga is meant to draw us into the boundlessness of the Divine. It challenges us to move beyond the narrow limits in which we confine the Holy One, and to acknowledge in our heart of hearts that God, Mother and Father of us all, has many children - and more than one blessing."

**To break the borders of the past. To step beyond limits, and encounter the boundlessness of the Divine. Not just because we have to. But because the enterprise will enrich us all.**

Let me ask you a question. What is your favorite place to go in the area? Is it the Mall downtown? Is it Georgetown on a Saturday night? Is it somewhere I haven't thought of - in which case, why haven't you told me about it?

Let us imagine, for a moment, that you are a teenager, and your favorite place to go is White Flint Mall. Now let us imagine, for a moment, the theologically dubious proposition – although some people, and not just teenagers, seem to live by this – that White Flint Mall is God. So the question is: how do we get to God?

Well, from here, we can take East-West Highway directly to 355, turn right, and get to God. Or, we can cut over on Jones Mill to Jones Bridge, turn on Connecticut, swing onto 495 and then get to 355. There are, indeed, many paths to God.

For years, for centuries, religions played with one another what my teacher Larry Hoffman called the “truth” game. My path is “true,” and leads towards God, and your path is “false,” and leads to the bottom of the Potomac River. Or someplace...warmer. Now, however, we are able to see the whole thing differently. And we can play the “meaning” game. My path leads to God. It is meaningful to me. Your path also leads to God. It is meaningful to you.

[Potholes]

There are many paths to God. Our path of Judaism is authentic, and special, and precious. And holy. But it is not the only one. That is my vision, that is the value I see in openness. That is the road I take, and the approach I try to teach to others.

Years ago, another rabbi also spoke of the value of diversity. Commenting on the story of the Tower of Babel, the Italian Renaissance-

era writer Ovadia Sforno asked what was, after all, the real sin of the people? It is never stated clearly in the Torah. What did they do wrong? Sforno wrote that they were, in fact, too unified, that they pursued an evil end, the building of an idol, and that their unity would lead them to succeed. Better have protection against uniformity, he argued, in case it goes wrong. Better to have differences, and different paths, which lead people to ask questions. And interact with those who are not the same. It is only through differences and diversity, Sforno said, that we are ultimately able to pursue the truth.

And at the end of the day, let us remember the twins, whose struggle started this whole discussion. They are not merely paradigms of separation, nor even simple reflections of each other. The twins, indeed, are reminders – that each one of them possesses something the other does not. It is something which, for *shlemut*, for wholeness, for completion, for “shalom,” the other needs. It is the lesson that we all have, inside ourselves, a pieces of another’s puzzle. And that somewhere out there, in a world we must open ourselves to, someone has a piece of our puzzle.

Jacob and Esau remain, ever and always, the different sides of ourselves. And they are a reminder, forever, in struggle and in reconciliation, that we need each other.

*Shabbat Shalom.*