

**Bearing the Bones of Joseph:
Does Judaism Matter?
Parashat Vayichi
January 9, 2004**

"If You Are Jewish, Chances Are Your Grandchildren Won't Be." That was the headline of an advertisement run in New York area newspapers in the late 1970's.

The headline was based on a study by Elihu Bergman entitled "The American Jewish Population Erosion." Bergman predicted that by the year 2076, there would be no more than 944,000 Jews left in the United States, and perhaps as few as 10,420.

Bergman's study was immediately challenged. The very demographers Bergman cited repudiated his forecast within a year. Two major, national Jewish population studies have take place since that time, offering up a combination of hope and despair. The most recent, partially released in recent months, confirms a complicated picture, a combination of numeric decline and strength through internal commitment. A kind of "quality" over "quantity" portrait. But the shock of that initial statement from the 70's stays with us. Many of our efforts since then have been attempts to evade or avoid or deny or reverse these reports of our demise.

My question this night is not about the reasons behind such predictions. Nor is it about apathy or indifference. My question is about Jewish identity, and why, after all, we *want* our children and our grandchildren to be Jewish.

It is, still, the dawn of a new century. We are accepted in America, conversations with our neighbors are commonplace, real friendships have grown where before there was only the attraction of the unknown. For all the Israelis

speak of America being just one more stop on the long road of *galut*, of exile, even for all the temporary disruption the month of December brings we American Jews almost always feel fully, truly at home in America.

For years a fierce debate has been raging about the fate of Jews and Judaism in this country. How are we holding up in this new world of freedom? Is the cup half full -or leaking all over the table?

There have been many exhaltationists, those who point to the educational success and the achievements of America's Jews -- look at the pictures of Nobel Laureates, the list of Pulitzer Prize winners. Look at our support of Israel, our pursuit of renamed Nazis, the *chutzpah* with which we walk the corridors of power. Look at this year's Democratic presidential contenders: one Jewish man, one more with a Jewish wife, one with a Jewish father, one with a Jewish grandfather and one more with a Jewish girlfriend!

But there have been even more doom-sayers and pessimists, those who point out that high secular education is accompanied by Jewish illiteracy, those who point to wavering support of Israel, to a declining rate of conversion, to a shockingly low level of affiliation with any Jewish cause or community.

The latest studies split the difference in the debate: *Jews* are both declining in numbers and doing very well as individuals. But the question remains: does *Judaism* matter?

Do any of you remember the show from the early 90's called *Thirtysomething*. Someone once said that show was real life, his own lives, just played by people who were better looking than him. I will never forget one lingering image from that series, of Michael Steadman, confronted by his wife Hope who was willing to raise their children as Jews if only Michael could tell her what Judaism means. Tell me, she asked, what does it mean? Does Judaism matter? And he couldn't respond.

He couldn't respond. But we try. There have been so many answers, so many... and so many of them are incomplete... or even dangerous.

It is the night of the Exodus, and our slavery has come to an end. As the Israelites are hurrying about getting ready to leave, gathering their own belongings and the booty of Egypt, all of a sudden Moses says "Oy, I just forgot something. We can't leave yet. I just remembered that we have to bring with us the bones of Joseph." For Joseph had made his brothers promise that when God would finally redeem them from Egypt, they would bring his bones with them. And Moses realized, in the last moments of our slavery, that he had absolutely no idea where the bones of Joseph were buried.

A legend tells us that Moses looked for three days and nights for the bones of Joseph, but he looked in vain. Finally, Serach, the daughter of Asher, the niece of Joseph, the only survivor of that long ago generation came to Moses and said: "I will tell you where Joseph is buried. I was alive before the coming of the Kingdom of Night. I am the only one who can tell the story." Serach took him to the banks of the Nile, and she told him that Joseph's leaden coffin had been placed in the depths of the river. And there, looking down through the veil of water, Moses saw, mired in the mud, a dark, foreboding shadow.

Bones... and coffins in the mud. There is one part of Jewish history that binds us together as no other. It is the Kingdom of Night, the terror... of the Holocaust.

In a remarkable passage in his book *The Anatomy Lesson*, Philip Roth describes how the narrator's stricken mother is asked to write her name on a piece of paper.

She took the pen from her hand, and instead of writing "Selma" wrote the word "Holocaust." This was in Miami Beach, in 1970, inscribed by a woman whose writing otherwise consisted of recipes on index cards, several thousand thank-you notes and a voluminous file of knitting instructions... But [the sickness] in her head seemed to have forced out everything except the one word. That it couldn't dislodge. It must have been there all the time without their even knowing.

For some Jews, that is all there is... a keen sense of our suffering and pain, an ever-present awareness... of trial... and bare survival.

Awareness gives birth to determination: we must survive despite the odds, flower in even hostile soil. The Jewish thinker Emil Fackenheim added a 614th commandment to the traditional list of 613: "Thou shall not give Hitler a posthumous victory!"

We must study, we must remember. Those who forget the horrors of history may come to repeat them. Witness Bosnia and Rowanda. Weep for Sarajevo -- once a city of splendor whose streets and whose now vanished tolerance I have seen first hand. We need both memory and vigilance. We need to tell the stories: to link our lives with those who were lost, to unroll the scrolls in this Sanctuary saved from the basements and burial grounds. To light candles in memory, to never, ever forget.

But there is a danger, too, in *too* much of an obsession with our tortured past. There is a danger that we will see in every enemy a Nazi, that we will look at Hussein in Baghdad and see only Hitler in Berlin. There is a danger that we will use the suffering of our yesterdays to exempt our actions from scrutiny today.

And still again, there is a danger that the images will overwhelm us: it is sometimes so *easy* to refer to the Holocaust, so *tempting*... in a classroom of clowning teenagers... *this* subject is the quickest way to get them to quiet down, to pay attention.

But there is a steep price we will someday pay if we use suffering as our surest motivation to commitment. The price we will pay... is that we may come to see the Holocaust as the most important thing that ever happened to us.

Torture, barbarism, murder and martyrdom. Is Jewish history just this? Is this Jewish destiny? Is this the Jew's lot in life?

For if Judaism is only that, if suffering and struggle and survival is all there is, if *all* that truly binds us together is the need to act on behalf of our rights and for the freedom of all Jews... then someday, some Jews will say: "what do we need it for?" "Never again" tells us only what to avoid, not what to embrace.

And so Moses stood on the banks of the Nile, and he said "Joseph, Joseph: the time has come Joseph. We are leaving now. It's time to go home. To the Promised Land."

Home to the Promised Land. Israel! If not the Kingdom of Night, then perhaps the shining light of hope and rebirth? For two thousand years we Jews have prayed for the dawn that we have seen... some of us within living memory. Maybe it is for Israel's sake... that Judaism matters.

Think of what we have seen in just the past twenty years. Bombs and blood, yes, but let's try to remember more than just the past few years. There was Rabin in Washington, Rabin in Rabat, ceremonies on the White House lawn, treaties with Egypt and with Jordan. And more: in the past two decades not one but two ancient and vastly different communities of Jews came home to Israel at last. From Moscow and from Addis Abbaba, from Leningrad and from Gondar they came, Russian and Ethiopian and Israeli bound together in a common hope and a shared future. What power there is in this drama, what sense of purpose we feel when Israel's gates are open to the huddled masses whom no one else would take.

Still they come, from Yemen and from Sarajevo and even from India...Israel fulfilling its promise, to be a haven for Jews in trouble and Jews in pain, wherever they are.

Israel is a vital part of our Jewish identity. More than politics, more than history, even on a spiritual level which I will address at another time. And you will find in the foyer flyers announcing our new Temple Shalom trip to Israel, this coming summer. Just as it is a sacred duty to preserve the memory of the Shoah, I believe it is the obligation of every Jew to visit, to spend time in, to connect with Israel.

But that, too, isn't all there is. To paraphrase Leonard Fein, the founder of *Mazon*, we must be more than "ticket takers, we American Jews." We cannot be merely ushers or audience to Israel's exclusive drama. We are moved beyond words by images we never expected, we are bound up in Israel's fate and future. We even often say "we" when referring to Israel, yet we stay here. We remain Americans. Israel is a *very* important part of who we are as Jews, a vital part of our Jewish lives. But it isn't all of it.

Again, what do we affirm... as *American Jews*.

With Moses' words, the coffin floated to the top of the river, and Moses placed it on his shoulder, and he found that it weighed almost nothing, that he felt strong and fit, that it was more a blessing than a burden. A connection with the past, and a promise for the future. Moses walked into the wilderness. And there are some who say that of all of Moses' deeds, there was none greater than the fact that he carried with him the bones of Joseph. And Moses, in doing the right thing, in carrying out his promise, was filled with joy.

Filled with joy. Our very name as a people is Israel, the name came first, before even the country. *Yisrael* -- the name means "the one who wrestles with God." Not to always struggle with demons. It is a promise that we will also grapple with glory in our search for meaning. And out of that cosmic tussle... comes not only commiseration... but celebration.

We speak of *simchat torah*, the joy of Torah – and the holiday of that name when we carry in our arms the precious vessel of our faith... and we dance. Even in the dark nights, we have danced. Even before the first steps of freedom came to Moscow there were times when Jews poured onto the streets and danced not only in defiance, but also in delight. Elie Wiesel says that he has never seen such fervor, such joy as in the *Simchat Torah* celebrations of the Jews of Moscow.

There is joy in all our celebrations: in the fruit-tasting hut-building of Sukkot, in the gift-giving light-spreading of Hannukah, in the tree-planting earth-affirming of Tu B'Shevat, in the merry-making, mask-wearing of Purim, in the special food and stains and sacred story of Passover. There is joy in a naming, joy at a *bris* -- well, for everyone except the baby, perhaps.

There is the joy in hearing the stories of our people, of looking into the eyes of ancient characters and seeing there our own families, with the same strivings, the same passions, the same hopes, the same human failings. This is the heart of Jewish study, this linkage across the centuries, this making of connections between our ancestors' search for meaning and for answers, and our own. And this sharing of ancient wisdom, this heritage of asking hard questions enriches our lives. We are not the first to ask questions of life; we are part of an ongoing community of those who seek answers.

Yes, there is pain and hurt and harm in this wounded world of ours. There is the pain of someone suffering a tragic loss, or struggling against oppression and

injustice. Even in marshalling anger and indignation in response, however, there is joy in the task to which we are called, in building a better world. Our call to be part of our community, to fight hunger, to build shelter, to defend the oppressed, to seek peace, to pursue justice, to bring comfort... our ancient tasks are a life-affirming, life embracing mission... as needed now in this modern world as they ever were. There is the deepest satisfaction in knowing that because of something we have done in our lives, with our time, with our energy or effort, our children or the children of our community will live in a *happier* place, a *healthier* place... a *holier* place.

There is joy in hearing God's voice, while standing in the circle of the sacred with our people in prayer, part of a covenant that was entered into long ago at Sinai, and continues to unfold in our own lives. We are the bearers of more than bones. We are the bearers of the past, yes, but also the shapers of the future, the recipient of at least one of God's covenants.

And there is joy in the choices that we Jews of this generation can make, choices we have never had before: true, we are free now to abandon Judaism; true, we are for the first time able to ignore the ancient call. But we can also choose to embrace our Jewish life in new and creative ways, with new stories told along with the old, with new poems and new songs, new roles for women, new understandings for all. There is joy after all in being... American Jews.

Does Judaism matter? Look at the couple under a *huppah*. Look into the face of a parent holding a baby at a naming -- and look into the face of a parent watching their children hold children of their own. Look into a youth group meeting and see the kids flopped on the floor, disorderly, chaotic... and bound together in a way they wouldn't dare admit. Look into your own heart, search your own memory and find your own answer.

Once, not so long ago, a different Prime Minister of Israel left on a different journey. Golda Meir went to Moscow, to serve as Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. No one knew how the Soviet Jews would react to her. There had been no legal Jewish education in Russia since 1917. Perhaps they were gone as Jews?

But when word got out that she was coming to services more than 100,000 Jews came out to greet her. They lined up in front of the synagogue in order to see her, to touch her, to wave to her, to welcome her.

And Golda... Golda Meir was so moved that she could hardly speak. All she could say as she made her way through the crowd was this: "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for coming, thank you for being here, thank you for remaining Jews."

Shabbat Shalom.