

**Standing Still; Diving Deep:
Sign, Symbol and the Torah of our lives
Parashat Vayichi; December 24, 2004**

I begin as did the *darshanim*, the preachers of old, with a surprise, a seemingly random statement, out of context, not connected with the story before us, a verse from somewhere “else” in our Sacred Scripture, to be held up against, to reflect upon, to bounce against the story of this week’s portion. And then the two verses together, the outside and the inside, the random and the mandated, will work in tandem, and at this, the darkest time of the year, together shed light on our lives today.

A Biblical verse, from the prophet Jeremiah: “*V’dir’shu et-Sh’lom ha’ir asher hig’leiti etchem, v’hit’pal’lu b’ada’ah L’Adonai*; Seek, ye, the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Eternal on its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.”

Are we, then, in exile? Do we retain even here that trace, that marker that has followed us through all the centuries of our wandering, that sense of ourselves as ultimately insider-outsiders, indeed, perhaps, of ongoing marginality? Sometimes it seems as if this land has been for us a new Zion, a home of the heart, with no distinctions remaining between our Jewish lives and our identity as Americans. There are other times, however, when reminders leap up before us, even in the midst of warm greetings and good intentions. How, then, do each of you handle it – what has been your personal strategy, to the near ubiquitous greeting

of this month? How do you respond, as a person, as a Jew, at a check out line or casual encounter, on being wished a “Merry Christmas?”

What is exile? It is a question addressed by the Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, the second rebbe of the Gerer Chasidim, in a work which had such a profound impact that its author was known forever after simply by the title of his book: the Sefat Emet.

We have already discussed a unique feature of this week’s *parashah*, this week’s Torah portion. It is the fact that, alone among the portions of the Torah, it is “closed,” that is, in the scribal tradition of writing the words on the scroll of the Torah, there is absolutely no opening, no additional space, between the end of last week’s portion, and the beginning of this week’s. It is the only time this happens in the entire Torah. It must, therefore, mean something. In what would seem to us to be possibly a scribal accident or coincidence, there must nevertheless be great meaning, and a lesson to be learned.

Already in the middle ages the great commentator Rashi asked: Why is this *parashah* “closed?” Because it contains within it the account of the death of Jacob, and it is trying to teach us that as soon as our father Jacob departed this life, the eyes and the hearts of the Jewish people were “closed up” because of the misery of Egyptian slavery.

An interesting claim. That we can learn from the layout of the page something about the condition of our ancestors. But, as the Sefat

Emet points out, there is a problem. It is a question of history. It is kind of complicated. But what a great reward we get at the end!

Here is what the Sefat Emet says: we find a difficulty in the Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 1:8). Based on the verse from Exodus that “Joseph died and all his brothers and all that generation” (Exodus 1:6), the Midrash concludes that as long as one of those who originally went down into Egypt was still alive, the Egyptians did not enslave Israel.”

From Rashi’s comment above we infer that the slavery began a short time after the death of Jacob. But from the Midrash, and from the story recounted in the Torah, it seems clear that it did not begin until a long time after the death of Joseph, many years later. How to reconcile the two accounts? The Sefat Emet says: it is probable that the actual *physical slavery* did not begin immediately – but that a kind of *spiritual slavery* did, indeed, begin with the death of Jacob.

He elaborates: The Jewish people were unaware; they did not see or feel how Egyptian culture began to penetrate and influence them. What was really going on was not evident. The eyes and hearts of the Jewish people were closed, until finally their eyes were unable to see and their hearts unable to feel anything but the surface. The superficial. The external. And this, he concludes, this is the core experience of exile.

What an astonishing insight! With this commentary Egypt disappears altogether as a country, as a physical place. This is psycho-

history, a psychological and spiritual reading of the text. As with all great Torah that truly touches our lives, slavery and exile are not about then, and them. This story is about us, and now.

And we. We know this Egypt. We know what it is like to let a culture surround us, inundate us, influence us... sometimes without our even knowing what is happening. It is a process that goes on all the time. But somehow... somehow we are more aware of it... at this time of year.

Much of the discussion of the holidays of this season revolves around the search for the spirit, the message, the meaning of the day. We hear – indeed, we may make – many comments about commercialism, about how both Chanukah and Christmas have devolved into an orgy of gift-giving. But in our sensitivity to the season, in our feeling of partial displacement in December, something much more important is going on than mere wistful nostalgia for a less commercial past. The symbols of the season are seen... they are seen everywhere. But as they are *over* done and *over* present they are emptied of their content. The symbols are used only as trim and trapping. When they are everywhere there meaning is nowhere; the balance between inner meaning and outer representation is tipped too far in one direction. They are too external. And thereby become... superficial.

In fact the symbols of the season – both Jewish and Christian -- are used rather as signs, signs whose only function is to say that a holiday is upon us.

The identity issues raised this season for Jews as a minority in the midst of this country, and this culture is partly a question of semiotics. Semiotics is a term that goes back to the first days of the development of psychology as a modern discipline. It is the science of the study of symbols. And it hinges on an important insight: that there is a difference between “signs” and “symbols.”

A sign... “signifies.” It is basically a pointer. It has what is meant to be universally agreed upon meaning. A symbol “symbolizes.” It is richly powerful, and deeply evocative. It echoes in different ways. And while many people would agree that a symbol *is* powerful, if it works the way it is supposed to work they would *not* all use the same words to describe what a symbol means to them.

This intellectual distinction has real consequences. When you are driving down the road, you do not want to encounter a stop “symbol.” You want road signs to be pointers, upon which everyone agrees, and upon which we can rely for the safety and security of our very lives.

A symbol, on the other hand, would be something like... a flag. What *is* a flag? It is more, surely, than a piece of cloth. Why were so many people upset, a few years ago, by the issue of the burning of an American flag? Or, what does it mean... to have an American – and an

Israeli – flag in our Sanctuary? (And, by the way, where are they now, and did you notice that they were not back? The Worship Committee and Sanctuary Committee will be having a discussion at some point in the future of where those flags belong, and what it means to have them in the Sanctuary, as opposed, for example, to where they might well wind up, in the Social Hall.)

And what are the candles on Friday night? What comes to your mind when we light them? What images and feelings come to mind when you think of lighting them at home? Do you think of Shabbat? Or of tradition? Of a feeling of warmth? Or of your mother? What the candles “mean” is a complicated question. But they can be powerful pieces of our lives. If they operate at the level of symbols.

Confusing sign and symbol leads to two of the greatest problems I see in the way people react to religion. Taking a symbol, which has many different meanings, and turning it into a sign, that is, thinking that something which is supposed to echo and resonate with meaning is simply a marker with a single explanation, can lead to either fundamentalism, on the one hand, or atheism, on the other. We can say about a symbol that *this* is what it means, that there is one truth, and all other interpretations are false. That is the path of fundamentalism and exclusivity. Or we can say that, since this item means one thing, and we can't accept or don't relate to that one expression of meaning, that we then distance ourselves from the discussion, dismiss the entire

enterprise, find no meaning in the tools of our tradition... simply because we reject one meaning they have been given.

Intolerance, or indifference. All because we want to pin down and define that which was meant to operate...at a much deeper level. All because we see only the superficial, only the external, only, perhaps, the cognitive and rational...and do not let ourselves open up, and feel with our heart.

We return to this time, and the symbols of this season. What, then, is all the fuss, what's all that angst about Jews and trees. (Someone once suggested, by the way, that in the future all Jews will have Christmas trees... saplings of a sort... and that we will plant them... on Tu BeShevat. I demurred. I said, instead, that we would buy trees for Tu BeShevat at this season. But on December 26. On sale.) After all, all of us know Jews whose very name is Tanenbaum.

Look, I am not talking about interfaith families here. That is a far more complicated question. But a Jew who argues that a tree is nothing more than a national symbol, or, indeed, a “non-religious” Christian – which is a term that is in and of itself *far* more problematic than a “non-religious” Jew – someone who says that the tree is just about gifts, or joy, or family... is making a sign out of a symbol. But you can't control a symbol. You can't stop the echoes. We make part of the meaning of our lives, yes, but full meaning lies not in what we impose alone, but in a

socially constructed context, a redolent web of connections within a larger metaphorical system. We are called upon to be aware of the real motives, and the cultural influences, and the implications of the decisions in our lives.

This is a time of year replete with reminders. We remember, in December, that not everyone is the same. We recall that we have found our home, that we have made our home, in a place where we are both part of and apart from the majority culture. In this annual reminder is an opportunity: to examine our lives, to rekindle our identity, to see with open eyes and feel with open heart.

And it is only with our connection to ourselves intact that we really can connect in a healthy way to the world around us. To really know who we are, and where we live. Physically. And spiritually.

Two verses combine, and shed light in the darkness. The words of Jeremiah. And the last days of Jacob. Read not these words the way they seem on the surface. Hear them now, with a new ear. Read not: “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you. Pray to the Eternal on its behalf. For in its prosperity you shall prosper.” Read the words instead this way: “Seek depth, in the place that you are standing. Find meaning, out of the exile of your own experience. Look to Eternity, in the midst of the ephemeral. For in the richness of meaning we will discover that, no matter the external challenges we face, prosperity lies within.”

Shabbat Shalom. Merry Christmas to our neighbors and, in many cases, our loved ones. And in the place we find ourselves, in city in which we live: Happy New Year.