

THE POETRY OF THE JEWISH VISION; THE PROSE OF JEWISH LIFE

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. . . We are hurting as a community from a crisis of Jewish vision and from a deficiency of poetry. Even the visions we retain from yesterday are becoming narrower and narrower.

I believe that Franz Kafka was right when he said "we Jews are not painters. We cannot depict things statically. We see them always in transition, in movement, in change. We are storytellers . . . A storyteller cannot talk about story-telling. He tells stories or is silent."

The Torah tells us the following story:

There was a time when a great tide of evil swept the world. Evil knew no bounds and no limits. Callousness, cruelty, corruption ruled the world. People were things to be used and discarded. Compassion and mercy and love were in exile.

The Creator looked with horror at the world He had created. He had given his creatures free will but He had not expected this raging tide of evil. Should He be silent? After all, people were only using the power He had given them. Or should He intervene?

He brooded while a man called Noah slowly built his little boat, hoping that people would see Noah's work and think of the great tide of evil in their world. But Noah built and the world went on its way. After all, what can be learned from a solitary, flaky old man who builds a boat in his back yard?

So He acted. To cleanse the great tide of evil he sent a great flood of water. The flood would purge the world of its pollution.

Noah's little boat became an Ark that saved the seed of mankind and the seed of animal-kind for the new world that was to rise from the flood.

Let us look for a moment at Noah's Ark. Carefully constructed and caulked

against the raging waters, Noah was instructed: make sure your ark has a *Tzohar*.

What is a *Tzohar*? Our sages related the word *Tzohar*, to *Tzoharayim*, light. The Ark had to have light. But where was the light to come from? What was to be its source?

Rashi the great medieval Bible Commentator put it this way:

Some say *Tzohar* was a window and others say it was a gem that provided illumination.

This seemingly simple observation, expressed in the cryptic code of rabbinic Hebrew, points to one of the historic and enduring conflicts in Jewish life and thought. If we decode Rashi's observation and put it into the language of our day, this is what the Torah is teaching us, as the Rabbis understood it:

Jews can survive the storming sea of evil and violence in the world only if we emulate Noah. We must become a boat people and build a strong Ark of Jewish community life. But what do we do for light in the Ark?

Some say that the Ark must include a window to the world. Others say that we don't need windows to a wicked world. We will get all the illumination we need from the gems of our own tradition.

That ancient conflict is still at the heart of many of the inner tensions that mark Jewish life in our day.

There is a part of the Jewish world that would don its Noah's uniform of black hats and black coats, enter its private arks of Boro Park and Meah Shearim, lock the door and seal themselves off from the wicked world, relying wholly on their own inner light.

Some Jews are tempted to jump overboard, abandon their ancient Ark, and rely on their presumed ability to swim in raging waters.

The rest of the Jewish world, however, stands on the side of those sages who said that the Ark must contain a window to the world. The world, whatever its evil, is not all darkness. We dare not batten down the hatches of the Ark of Jewish life, board up the windows to the world and wait for the *Mashiakh*.

It may look heroic but Custer's Last Stand is not the Jewish way to a better world. Through the story of Noah, the Torah is teaching us that the Jewish way is Noah sailing for life, looking through the window waiting for the moment to open the door to a new world.

I commence with the story of Noah because the tale emphasizes two crucial truths: First, the pre-condition of Jewish life is the survival of the Jews. A truism perhaps but a truism that needs constant reiteration: there is no Jewish purpose without a Jewish people. Thus, our first goal as a community is to create and cultivate the conditions which enable Jews to survive as Jews. We need a strong and secure *Medinat Yisrael* and we need the structures and institutions that create a sense of community, from Federations to shuls and schools, from libraries to community centers, from kosher markets to *mikvehs*. We need them all and more. They are the fabric from which the garment of Jewish communal life is woven.

But Jews cannot live on an ethic of survival alone. We cannot live without purpose. A community that does not resonate with Jewish purpose and Jewish meaning will not endure long as a viable Jewish community.

There is a classical cartography to Jewish life. A Jewish community is always travelling on a road called *Lekh L'kha*. We are a *Kehilla Kedosha*, a community on-the-way to sanctity; on the high road from survival to sanctity is the Jewish condition.

The high road is not an easy road. As

community leaders, we know from personal experience the truth in Oscar Wilde's jest that "the trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings." I am not sure it is true today of socialism but I know for sure it is true of Jewish communal life. Jewish leadership takes a lot of evenings and a lot of mornings too; it takes a lot of dedication, a lot of persistence, a lot of perseverance.

Speaking personally, I am convinced that we can find the strength to slog through the maddening mud of the daily only if we are somehow able not to lose sight of the stars, the great over-arching vision of Jewish life: the dream of building a sacred community, imbued with the love of God and a commitment to build a better world, *Ahavat Ha'Shem* and *Tikun Olam*, the dream of a community marked by a sense of love for the Jewish people and for humanity, *Ahavat Yisrael* and *Ahavat Ha'briyot*.

Is this too much poetry to swallow while we gulp the daily? I confess that I share the view of Joseph Brodsky, the new Nobel laureate in literature, who wrote: "poetry always precedes prose."

Much of the malaise in contemporary Jewish life flows from forgetting that Brodskyan equation. We are hurting as a community from a crisis of Jewish vision and from a deficiency of poetry. Even the visions we retain from yesterday are becoming narrower and narrower. From Abraham's vision of an Israel as numerous as the stars to Jacob's vision of a ladder to heaven, to Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones of Israel taking on renewed life, we have come to today's tunnel vision which sees the ideal Jew as the one who has mastered a number of classical Jewish texts.

Texts in themselves, however sacred, provide the notes, not the music of Jewish life. It is alas possible to master the great classical texts of Jewish life while remaining tone-deaf to the spiritual music embedded in these texts. Only those who see the stars, the great architectonic vision of

Jewish purpose, can unlock the spiritual music encoded in those ancient and arcane texts.

A Jewish education that does not communicate both the notes and the music is a failure. We all know the results of teaching Hebrew without communicating Jewish values: a generation of secularists spouting Hebrew. And now we have a new, perhaps even more difficult and dangerous challenge, the challenge posed by Jews who can spout biblical and rabbinic texts with ease but who are deaf to the spiritual music of these texts and their messages of justice and righteousness and compassion for all God's creatures.

We dare not despair, however, the music is there, the music is there.

At the beginning of this century a French astronomer announced: "I have swept the universe with my telescope and I find no God." A British astronomer replied in these words: "That is as unreasonable as for me to say I have taken my violin apart, and I have examined each piece with my microscope and I find no music."

Symmetry requires that just as I commenced with a story, I conclude with a story. This is a story, not about a biblical hero, but about a twentieth century artist, Pablo Picasso.

When Picasso was asked why his early paintings were so solemn and conventional, in contrast to his later works which were volcanic in their passion and exuberance, he replied: "It takes a long time to become young."

Picasso was describing his own odyssey as a painter. But he could also have been describing a number of local Jewish communities, which the recent CJP demographic study demonstrates, are not only growing in numbers, but are growing younger. Like Picasso, it has taken them a long time to become young.

To become young means to have a new vision of the possible, unclouded by yesterday's defeats, undiscouraged by yesterday's frustrations and failures. To be young means to have new dreams, to see fresh possibilities. To be young means not be afraid of tomorrow.

It was the same Pablo Picasso who shortly before he died complained about computers: "They are useless. They can only give answers."

Picasso, the poet in paint, was right. Machines or movements that provide answers are not enough. More than answers, we need new questions. Above all, we need new dreams for, in the poetry of Delmore Schwartz' phrase, "in dreams begin responsibilities."