

Exodus 2010 December 25, 2010 / 18 Tevet 5771

On my way into shul this morning I wished our security guard, Bill, a Merry Christmas. I asked him if he was bummed because he has to work on Christmas. He said, "No, I'm used to it, and besides, our big service was last night." "Oh, how was it?" "Real nice", he said, "You know, it starts at 8:00 and the Mass is at 11:00. People start coming in dribs and drabs and it fills up by 1:00. You get to see people you haven't seen all year, but I guess I'm glad they come." I told him I knew just what he was talking about! We have a lot in common, we Jews and Christians, more than we often think. So today I would like to give a Christmas Sermon about Shemot (Exodus).

Once upon a time, of course, Christmas time was a dangerous one for Jews. In Europe it was a time to reassert the blood libels, and this season was a favorite for pogroms. There are people here today who remember what a dangerous time of year this could be in Europe. But, thank Gd, that time has largely passed, especially here in America. Today the greatest threat is not that Christians hate us. No, the greater threat is that it is so easy and so tempting to become part of the non-Jewish world. The threat is not that a Jew will marry a gentile and get beat up, but that he will stop being Jewish or transmitting our faith to his kids. Anti-semitism is simply not the threat it once was.

No, now we can learn to live with one another on parallel tracks, each trying to serve our Creator in ways that will make Gd proud. Today the threat is not one faith or the other so much as it is the threat of faithlessness in America. Religious people - people who take Gd seriously-- are up against a selfish hedonism that is threatened by religion. Hedonism asks "What's in it for me?" while religion forces a person to ask "What does Gd want me to do for others?" Materialism tells us, "Keep more and give less". Religion teaches, "Give more and you will have more." You can understand why hedonism and atheism so often go together.

One big challenge to those of us who take religion seriously, both Jews and Christians, is that our faith is an outgrowth of our history. We are who we are today because of things that happened a long, long time ago. We both have ancient stories that are difficult to prove as factual and true. For Christians it is the issue of whether a Savior can and did take human form; that Gd could have a son. We Jews don't believe that this is possible. On the other hand, for us as Jews, the Exodus from Egypt can prove equally vexing. The Burning

Bush, the splitting of the Red Sea, Torah at Sinai, a historical Moses... where is the archaeology, the science to back this up as fact? People who will deny the relevance of religion will point to the lack of historical evidence and say to us, Jews and Gentiles - "Look! The whole thing is a fraud! Why perpetuate a myth that cannot be proven? Look at how many people have been killed in the name of religion!"

First of all, a quick fact-check: Who were the greatest mass murderers of the past 100 years? Did they kill in the name of Gd? In the name of their own religion? NO. The Nazis, responsible for 34 million lives lost, were not religious people. Maoist communism? 40 million. Anti-religious. Stalinism? - 20 million and anti-religious. Khmer Rouge: 2.2 million - no religion there, either. So let's set aside the argument against religion as a source of death in the 20th century. Instead, look at all the religious organizations that go into the darkest areas of society and shed light, helping others person to person. There is no comparison between the number of lives saved by religious people in the last 100 years and those who have killed because of their faith in Gd. No comparison!

Let's go back, though to the tougher question: Historical validity. But let me address this question by reframing the discussion. Atheism, faithlessness, questions whether religion is factual and true. But let's clarify our definitions of "Factual" and "True". I was born on February 14th - that is factual. I live in Voorhees, I drive a silver car, and I am married. All factual, provable, verifiable. I love my wife, I believe in Gd, and I am patriotic - these are all "true", but not scientifically factual. Some things are true even if they are not facts. How shallow and meaningless our lives would be if they were based only on facts and not on truth. Truth is what gives our lives direction.

When I sit at the Seder table and recount the exodus, historical fact of dates and numbers has little to do with it. The truth of the story is what motivates me, and all of us, to look at our lives differently. We know what it was like to be oppressed, to be slaves, to be the "other". And we have been telling that story around our tables for so long that it has become part of our communal consciousness. It motivates us to look out for other people, to protect the rights of the disenfranchised, to right societal wrongs. What makes the story "true" is that it motivates us to live better and more worthy lives.

I suspect the case is the same for many Christians. What makes their religion true is not simply belief, but the behavior that

belief fosters. Theirs is also a story of kindness to others and looking out for the weak, poor and needy. How else could you explain the thousands of volunteers in New York this year who are acting as Secret Santas. Every year thousands of letters are addressed to Santa and sent to the Post Office. And every year, this year more than ever, volunteers come forward and fulfill the wishes of the kids who write, returning the gifts to the post office to be given out in time for Christmas to kids they will never meet!. It's an amazing story, and it has little to do with historical facts. It comes from faith based on Truth.

I know people, Jewish people, who have to go on vacation this time of year just to escape from the Christmas deluge. But I, for one enjoy knowing that there are non-Jews, in large numbers, who take their holiday seriously and hold to the Truth that is in it. Is there a materialistic side to Christmas? Of course there is! But ask almost any Jewish kid his favorite Jewish holiday and he will likely say "Hannukkah", and not for the story of the Maccabees. We face many of the same challenges. And their good efforts to transcend materialism, their mitzvah work, often mirrors ours, too. We can learn from one another. This is the time of year we hear about it, and I for one, am glad. I hope that it serves as motivation for Jewish people, not just to think about how we are different, but how we are the same - how our faith should motivate us to greater sensitivity, kindness and care. The enemy is not another's faith, but lack of faith in others as well as a lack of motivating religious Truth in our own lives. As we begin the New Year we need to take a long hard look at what is True in our lives, in our faith, in our religious outlook and to continue to challenge ourselves to live lives that reflect that greater Truth in a way that really makes a difference - to us, and to those whose lives we can touch. Shabbat Shalom.