

Thoughts From The Heart

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The Long Journey Back Home - Part II

WHAT would I do IF SOMEDAY I STOOD FACE TO FACE WITH A SIMILAR DILEMMA, HAVING TO CHOOSE BETWEEN MY TRIBE AND FAMILY AND THE YEARNINGS OF MY HEART?? MY ANSWER WAS HARD NOSED. FOR NOW, I HAD NO TASTE FOR BELONGING TO THE JEWISH WORLD IF IT MEANT AN ABDICATION OF MY DREAM, WHICH WAS TO FIND A SPIRITUALITY THAT COULD COEXIST WITH MY FREEDOM. IF THE RELIGION OF MY BIRTH COULD NOT ACCEPT OR ACCOMMODATE MY SEARCHING, QUESTIONING, FREEDOM-BOUND NATURE, THEN I WOULD HAVE TO FIND SPIRITUAL SUSTENANCE ELSEWHERE. NOT BEING ABLE TO ATTEND HEBREW SCHOOL, I WAS FORCED TO ATTEND THE SCHOOL OF MY FATHER'S FAMILY FAITH - CATHOLIC SCHOOL!!! SLOWLY, SILENTLY, I FELT THE HEAT OF A SECRET STAGE LIGHT SHIF IN MY DIRECTION. SOON, IT WOULD BE MY TURN TO MAKE CHOICES, TO DECIDE WHO I WAS AND WHERE I STOOD ON LIFE'S STAGE. I NOW FELT MYSELF TO BE ON MY OWN MORE DEEPLY THAN EVER BEFORE. I WAS

Running from a highly conditional world that was guarded by a multitude of games, rules, and laws. And if the principle of love lay at its core, it seemed so well hidden, even from its gatekeepers, that I began to wonder why anyone would bother to look. I stopped all efforts to remain in my religion of birth and threw myself in the great mystery search that stood far beyond the forms or even the theologies of either of my parents religions. There was one God, one who was both personal and all-knowing, and willing, despite all of our man-made roadblocks, to gift us with the grace of being accepted. Something either one of my parents religions did - the Jewish side - didn't accept me due to who my father was - and the color of my skin. The Catholic side didn't accept me because of who my mother was - a "Jew" thus so was I under Jewish law. How dare I, a "Jew" attend their schools and not practice or attend "mass". The concept of grace, for example, the free gift of God's love, is one that runs throughout Jewish scriptures. Yet it first took looking at these scriptures from a Christian perspective, that of my father's and Christian friends, for me to see that grace, or chesed, even existed as a concept in Judaism. You would never find a sign in a synagogue saying "God loves you!" Jews think of such adages as being strictly Christian.

THE IDEA THAT GOD'S LAW FOLLOW US EVERYWHERE IS A VERY JEWISH ONE. I CALLED MY MOTHER FROM ENGLAND AND TOLD HER THAT I HAD MET SOMEONE, AND WE WERE DISCUSSING MARRIAGE AND I WANTED TO KNOW HER THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ABOUT IT. SHE CHOSE HER WORDS VERY CAREFULLY, AND JUST SAID WHY? YOU'RE NOT PRACTICING JUDAISM, OR ARE YOU? NO I'M NOT. SHE JUST SAID FOLLOW YOUR HEART. I THEN DISCUSS IT WITH A FEW JEWISH FRIENDS THAT WERE SERVING IN MY UNIT AND THE CONSENSUAL BELIEF WAS THAT INTERMARRIAGE WAS A DREADED PHENOMENON BECAUSE IT PRESENTED THE MOST SERIOUS DANGER TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S DISSOLUTION. JEWISH LIFE, THE THINKING GOES, WILL NOT SURVIVE IF SUCH PURA-LISM IS TOLERATED. I REALIZED THAT THE PROPONENTS OF THESE VIEWS COULD NOT POSSIBLY KNOW, AS I DID, HOW MANY JEWISH YOUNG PEOPLE WERE BEING TURNED AWAY BY THIS VERY MIND SET, WHICH WAS SO UNAPPEALING IN ITS NARROWNESS. I KNEW FIRSTHAND THAT IF THE ONLY WAY JEWISH LIFE COULD SURVIVE WAS TO ADOPT SUCH AN ISOLATIONIST SECTARIANISM, MANY JEWS WOULD PREFER NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS NARROW PAROCHIAL WORLD AT ALL. FROM THE OUTSIDE AT THE TIME, IT IS A STRANGE PROBLEM THAT MAKES NO LOGICAL SENSE. THERE IS SO MUCH FEAR ABOUT JEWISH PEOPLE'S DISSOLUTION THAT THE RABBIS ARE TURNING YOUNG PEOPLE AWAY IN AN EFFORT TO KEEP THE JEWISH RANKS SOLID. I THINK THAT IS BECAUSE THE PLACE FROM WHICH OUR POLICIES ARISE

is clearly not a RATIONAL ONE, BUT RATHER A HIGHLY CHARGED EMOTIONAL FIELD. SITTING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS OF JEW AND NON-JEW, I CAN SEE THAT THE ISSUE OF INTERMARRIAGE HAS BECOME LIKE A LIGHTNING BOLT FOR THE GREAT DISTRESS THAT THE JEWISH COMMUNITY FEELS ABOUT ITS FUTURE. AFTER CENTURIES OF POGROMS, EVACUATIONS, AND MASSACRES, THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAVE JUST SURVIVED A NEAR GENOCIDE, AND THE TRAUMA IS STILL IN OUR SYSTEM. NOW, TWO GENERATIONS AFTER THE HOLOCAUST AND LIVING IN A RAPIDLY SHIFTING SOCIETY, THE PSYCHE OF OUR PEOPLE (JUST LIKE THAT OF AN ABUSED PERSON) IS STILL WOUNDED AND ATTEMPTING TO HEAL. SO LIKE THE RAPE VICTIM WHO PULLS IN TIGHTLY IN ORDER TO RECOVER HIS OR HER VIOLATED BOUNDARIES, REMAINING CONTRACTED LONG AFTER THE ATTACK, SO THE VIOLATED BOUNDARIES OF OUR PEOPLE ARE STILL TAUT IN AN EFFORT TO COMPENSATE AND HEAL THE BRUTAL INVASION INTO OUR LIVES. SIXTY YEARS LATER, THE VERY TOPIC OF THE HOLOCAUST IS, FOR SOME, ENOUGH TO TRIGGER ANXIETY AND EVEN HYSTERIA. INTERMARRIAGE IS A GRAPHIC EXAMPLE OF RELAXING OUR BOUNDARIES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD, BOUNDARIES TO DATE, ARE STILL HEALING. FOR THIS REASON, SOME JEWS AUTOMATICALLY EQUATE IT WITH THE EVIL THAT CAME WHEN WE LAST TRUSTED THE OUTSIDE WORLD ENOUGH TO RELAX. BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT INTERMARRIAGE IS HARD TO STAY. THE BLENDING OF CULTURES AND RELIGIONS IS AN UNPRECEDENTED COMMUNAL PHENOMENON IN AMERICA AND ELSEWHERE

AND FOR JEWS, IT IS A PARADOXICAL ANSWER TO OUR
PRAYERS, AN INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCE OF OUR SUCCESS AND
INTEGRATION INTO WESTERN SOCIETY. NO QUICK SOLUTION OR
SWEEPING POLICY WILL ELIMINATE THIS BLENDING OR THE
PROBLEMS IT BRINGS WITH IT. STILL, WE CAN AVOID
BEING STUPID BY CONTINUING TO DIALOGUE, INSTEAD
OF PREACH, THUSBY CONTROLLING SELF-INFLICTED DAMAGE
ON OUR OWN PEOPLE. IF WE ARE TO SURVIVE AS A UNIFIED
PEOPLE, WE MUST FIND A WAY TO MAKE PEACE WITH INTER-
MARRIAGE, AND TO CAPITALIZE ON WHAT BENEFITS IT
MIGHT OFFER US. RELAXING OUR BOUNDARIES HAS NOT BEEN AN
ENTIRELY BAD THING. I KNOW MY PARENTS MARRIAGE CREATED
A POSITIVE IRRITATION IN ME, A CRISIS IF YOU WILL, THAT
COMPELLED ME TO SEEK OUT A DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING
IN JUDAISM, A SEARCH THAT MARRIAGE TO A JEW WOULD
PROBABLY NEVER HAVE BEEN PROVIDED. OPEN BOUNDARIES
HAVE BEEN USEFUL TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN YET
ANOTHER WAY. THEY HAVE HELPED US FIND NOURISHMENT IN
THE FORM OF IDEAS AND SPIRITUAL MEANING THAT
SEEMED TO BE ABSENT FROM OUR DIET AS JEWS. THESE
IDEAS - ALTHOUGH UNKOSHER TO SOME BECAUSE OF THEIR
FOREIGNNESS - HAVE CHALLENGED JEWS AS INDIVIDUALS AND
AS A COMMUNITY TO RE-THINK WHO WE ARE AND
ASSESS HOW OUR OWN VALUES AND TEACHINGS MEASURE UP.
FURTHER, WE MAY PUSH FOR JEWS TO MARRY JEWS, BUT THESE UNIONS
DO NOT NECESSARILY CREATE A RICH OR EVEN SUSTAINABLE JUDAISM. FOR JUDAISM
TO SURVIVE, MORE THAN NUMBERS MUST BE COUNTED.