

December 19, 2008

Two thoughts about this week's Torah portion:

The Torah reading for this week tells the beginning of the story of Joseph, from receiving a very special coat (perhaps just decorated, perhaps with many colors), to the moment when he checked on his brothers and was sold into slavery, to his arrival in Egypt where he was made the head of the house of Potiphar (Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard), to being framed by Potiphar's wife and then being put into prison, where he began his skillful interpretation of dreams.

This has been a difficult week for us, not knowing when we were going to get our power back, having to discard food that lacked refrigeration (or adequate temperatures for freezing) for too long, waiting for crews to arrive that were meticulously and deliberately putting people back "online" (and may still be), finding alternative modes of "entertainment" (how many people watched DVDs on portable players, listened to the radio, or played board games by candlelight?), and wondering where all the D batteries went (we know – they went to flashlights, most every one!). I can see Joseph in the Torah portion realizing that he was much more vulnerable than he ever imagined, but holding on to the hope that he would be restored to freedom. We probably are all thinking, at least a little, about being more prepared for what storms can do to our homes, neighborhoods and towns (as much as possible – our own battery supply is 3 times what it was before) – that, as some commentators said in the media, we may be more vulnerable than we thought before. As I write this note on my office computer, I am thankful for both electricity and internet service (and all the other ingenuity that makes this possible!). It is times like these that could lead us to view every moment that we have power in our homes, and wherever we go, as a miracle.

The story of Joseph and his brothers illustrates what can happen when sibling rivalry and resentment go off the scale. Eventually, the brothers learned that they were "their brother's keeper" (the lesson Cain didn't learn earlier in the Torah). Yet, we know that there are some people who still think only of themselves, and would, at every opportunity, take advantage of others for their own gain, not caring about the negative consequences to their fellow human beings. Many individuals and organizations trusted Bernard Madoff with their money, with the hope that he would diligently guard and grow their sources of charitable giving and pension funds. We now know that this trust was misplaced in the extreme. The first reports of losses are devastating, and we will probably hear more in the weeks and months to come. Several foundations that do good work, with their assets now gone, have totally disappeared. Let us hope that the values of trust and hope will guide individuals, organizations and communities in their investments of funds and in the spiritual and moral capital they engender with each other and within themselves.

Stay warm and safe, everyone!

***-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.***

December 11, 2008

"A Blessing - A Promise"

A Short Story Commentary

By Rabbi Larry Karol

(D'var Torah delivered at Temple Israel Dover Board meeting on December 10):

It had been a busy day. Working on the Temple newsletter, a visit to a patient in the hospital, Bar and Bat Mitzvah tutoring, and preparing for an adult education class had taken up the rabbi's time. There was one last thing he had to do before he went home - he took a few minutes to peruse commentaries for the weeks Torah reading, the story of Jacob wrestling with a man, perhaps an angel, perhaps God, just before he was going to meet his brother Esau after many years apart. Jacob was afraid that all Esau remembered about him was the deception that led to a loss of the oldest son's birthright and blessing. So when Jacob heard that Esau was coming with several hundred in his entourage, he was very afraid - it seemed that revenge was a more likely outcome than a tearful reunion. Jacob sent his family across the nearby river and he was alone.

So when the Torah says that a "man" wrestled with him, the rabbis wondered, "How could a man have been wrestling with him if he was supposed to be alone?" Some sages suggested that Jacob was wrestling with Esau's guardian angel to prepare for his encounter with his brother. Some say it was an angel doing direct bidding from God. Others suggested that Jacob was wrestling with himself. The match was not quite up to the professional media standards of WWE - there was no cheering crowd, no announcer proclaiming, "in this corner...", no running commentary... well, that's not exactly true! Let's tune in for a brief replay: "A man wrestled with Jacob until the rise of dawn. When the man saw that he could not overcome Jacob, he struck Jacob's hip socket, so that Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as the man wrestled with him." So the match was a draw with an injury!!! But the match wasn't over! Jacob refused to let go of his opponent, demanding a blessing. What he received was a name change - Israel - one who struggles with God, and not only that, this mysterious man/wrestler told Jacob/Israel that his new name meant that he had won this unexpected main event and was ready to see his brother Esau. The hip injury never healed but Jacob - or Israel - was no longer afraid and no longer alone.

In an uncharacteristic demonstration of organizing his personal space, the rabbi put his Torah commentaries back on the bookshelf in his office, grabbed his coat and his briefcase and headed for the front door of the Temple to go to the grocery store and then home for dinner. As he was about to leave, he saw a man walking towards the door. There was no car - and there were no tracks left in the newly-fallen dusting of snow on the sidewalk - but the rabbi knew he had to take at least a minute to be helpful.

"Hi - what can I do for you?" asked the rabbi as he let the man into the entry foyer.

"I was wondering, when are Friday night services, and how many are usually there?" asked the man.

With his best enthusiasm for the end of the day, the rabbi replied, "7:30 pm every Friday, unless we have something special going on – we usually get about 20 people – would you like to join us this week?"

The man said, "I've visited many other synagogues in this part of the country, and I wanted to be sure to come to yours, so yes, I will be there."

"Is there anything else you want to know?" the rabbi asked, as it seemed that the man wasn't finished.

"No...but I can't let you leave."

"What do you mean? I need to get to the grocery store and go home!" The rabbi was getting just a little impatient.

The man said, "You can't leave because I need you and your congregation to make a promise."

"Anything! Well, almost anything..." The rabbi was puzzled and a bit concerned, but with the door blocked by the stranger, he realized he was going nowhere and had to listen.

"I know that you were just reading about the Torah portion for this week about Jacob who received a new name, Israel, which means 'one who struggles with God.' Isn't that the name of your Temple - Israel?"

"Yes it is – so..." the rabbi wondered what would come next...

The man pleaded, "I want you to promise me that you will remind yourself and your congregants that you are all strugglers, no matter what happens. Whether you are facing a difficult economy, challenges at work or home, the time crunch of going back and forth from one meeting or appointment or sporting event to another, or trying to keep this Temple going, you are all strugglers - with God, with yourselves. And you have this building - this community - because you need to share your striving with each other. You see, when the Torah said that Jacob was left alone, he didn't really feel alone at all. The only reason he was able to win his unplanned wrestling match was by remembering that he was part of a family and the fulfillment of a promise - one made to his grandfather Abraham, and one affirmed to him in a dream. He remembered he was part of something greater - and that was why he prevailed and received that new name that is right there on your sign."

"So, whoever you are, you want me to make a promise?" The rabbi declared with sincerity but a little uncertainty, "I promise to remind myself, my family and my members that we are not alone - that we are in this together, and that we need to be there for each other in our struggles. Is that what you need to hear?"

"Yes," said the man, "and one more thing."

"What is it – I need to get home!"

"I need you and your congregation to believe in the promise you just made - it is the key to thriving as a community." The man said these words with a serious look into the rabbi's eyes."

"I have believed this all along - sometimes, I just don't see it happening. Still, I am willing to have faith that the struggles are worth every moment. Yes, I believe!" The rabbi was finally showing his spirit.

The man said, "I want you to think about what you just said and close your eyes and envision the best future you can - for you, your family, and your community."

"All right," said the rabbi. He closed his eyes. In a moment, he sensed that it was quiet around him - and he felt peaceful inside. He opened his eyes.

The man was gone - no one was blocking his way now, he could go home. Yet, the rabbi stayed in that spot for a minute or two, as a smile came to his face. He realized, that, like Jacob - or Israel - he was truly not alone. He walked out to his car as he watched the snowflakes fall softly onto the ground. Even with the darkness that had descended so quickly, the December evening was brighter than any he had ever known.

***-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.***