

RE'EH 2003

(penultimate drash presented at GW Hillel)

When I heard there was a parasha needing a dvar Torah, and was ready to volunteer, I looked at the parasha I had volunteered for, Reeh, and saw it was the same parasha I had discussed here last year. It's the only one I've ever done a drash for at Fabranken. So I thought, what was happening last year? Can I use the same material again? What did I talk about last year? I am interested in the passage of time and our values in connection with some passages in this parasha and its haftarah. More about this later.

My son and I recently returned from the 140th anniversary reenactment of the battle of Gettysburg of the U.S. civil war at Gettysburg Pennsylvania. 12,000 re-enactors in hot woolen uniforms engaged in choreographed battles firing period reproduction muskets and cannons, and with cavalry, civilian reenactors, women in period costumes, fife and drums. I spoke with descendants of the principle generals from both sides. We also spoke with the living history reenactor representing General Lee, leader of the Confederate South, who even rode a horse looking just like Lee's horse. In an evening encampment of the Confederates I chatted with some reenactors. One said that he had no ancestors from that war. They discussed their motivation for reenacting. And the one said, if he did have an ancestor in the fight, that soldier probably would be appalled that anyone would want to dress up and re-live the conditions that the ancestor had had to go through.

Later, we observed a living history presentation by an actor representing a compassionate battle surgeon, presented under a tent before rows of spectators. At one point, the character unexpectedly exclaimed in his narrative about a wounded drummer boy, "I, as a Jew, who hated Jesus so desperately, could not understand the youth's faith." We exited the tent soon after hearing those words, while a religious song was being sung. Hearing this part of the monologue, I had a range of feelings. I was glad the sensitive surgeon was portrayed as a Jew. I wondered, though, whether we were about to hear of some conversion experience by the supposedly misguided doctor. And I wondered: where did the actor's text come from? Was

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there actually a Jewish surgeon at Gettysburg? Who wrote this script? Was this part of some decades old reenactment skit? This experience came to my mind when I re-read the portion of Reeh advocating intolerance toward Canaanites of other religions, because I saw how much of history includes suspicion or disrespect of our religion.

Last year, 2002, when I gave the dvor Torah here for the parasha Reeh, the Middle East was hurting, just as it is now. Last year, the villain of the month was not Saddam Hussein, but bin Laden. In discussing Reeh with me, someone I know compared the parasha's admonition to persecute individuals who promote a foreign religion to reporting someone in the U.S. who confided a confederacy with bin laden; this obligation to report the person would be for the good of the nation. In discussion here, a reader (Rabbi Max Ticktin) said the parasha is a speech prior to an invasion, and the message is "don't trust the natives." This reminds me a little of the U.S. invasion of Iraq this year and U.S. rebuilding efforts. Last year there was concern about extremist Muslims using the Koran to justify terrorism. The biggest difference between now and then to me is local: a Fabrangen newsletter of last summer said, "there doesn't seem to be sufficient energy in the community to move forward to seeking other space." Those more knowledgeable than I might know what took place in the past year to galvanize the community in this respect. We're now preparing to move imminently to a new place so the children will have more space to learn.

If we progressive Jewish readers sometimes oppose what seems to us intolerant words in our ancient religious texts, it may be useful to recall that if much can change in one year, how much more could change in about 2,000 years.

Nevertheless, our responsible interpreting of sacred texts often seems like wrestling with tradition. Some dvora Torah I hear, or give, might at times best be summed up with, "that was then, this is now," end of dvor Torah.

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Last year for this parasha I argued, upon scholarly advice, that the part I find most objectionable, the directive to be the first to kill a friend advocating a foreign religion, might be acceptably interpreted to mean just the opposite: we should be compassionate toward such a friend. After all, we know that the patriarch Isaac deceives others at times and this does not mean we should do the same. Some texts prick our consciences, and make us think. But if we say some passages should mean the opposite, which passages should mean the opposite? Some conservative religious commentators say we get our sense of right and wrong from religion. If we progressive readers say that something from our religion is wrong, where do we get that idea or value from? Should we trace the conscience to the Enlightenment? Should we as Jews respectfully observe the birthdays of John Locke and Montesquieu, European liberal thinkers? I don't know enough about intellectual history to know whether these thinkers were themselves influenced by European rabbis who also commented at the time. I don't know where we get our values from.

My response this year is to look at the more positive portions of the parasha Reeh. The parasha says we should give to our brother, and not harden our heart or shut our hand. I would wish it said give to our neighbor, not just our brother. But we can easily draw lessons according to what we call specifically Jewish, religious values relating to tzedakah. Commentators say the text tells us we should be aware of both our giving and our motivation, and hope that if we open our hand, our heart will follow. And, as my son David advised me, look to the upbeat haftorah. The haftorah says, "he that hath no money: come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your gain for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good..." I see this as metaphorical language praising the spiritual side of life, that is accessible and worth more than money can buy. It echoes the words of last week's parasha, that we do not live by bread alone. These values are not from Enlightenment Europe.

The Israeli writer Amos Oz in his book of essays, *In the Land of Israel*, does say Judaism owes much to the Enlightenment and European rabbis and that Enlightenment values sometimes

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should supersede old tribalism. Sometimes in traditional Judaism there is a reference to money that seems strained to me: in an Art Scroll siddur, the misa bera says, “May he bless and heal the sick person because someone will contribute to charity on his behalf,” which seems a coercive reference to money for an individual seeking hope. But spiritual values are different from Enlightenment values, which may be related to Western materialism, too.

The opening lines of the parasha Reeh, which refers to Reeh, or behold, has been interpreted to mean, look, you individual (singular), it is a blessing that your group has accepted G-d’s commandments. Each of us chooses on what side, and in what way, we will re-enact the past. In life, and in making a parasha meaningful, I tend to have both 18th century and ancient Jewish values. I move from one to another trying to make a balanced Jewish interpretation.