

## Half Jewish

Rabbi Steve Cohen

Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara, CA

Friday night, December 28, 2007

We returned late last night from one week in the north of England, where we stayed with Marian's mother Fran who lives in the little village of Wigton. The current church in Wigton's village center was built in 1788, on the exact location of the previous church, which was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Just half a mile to the south are the remains of a Roman fort, built in the first century AD, and the major roads in the area still follow the exact routes laid down by the Roman legions, as they conquered and ruled this countryside, so distant from the center of the Roman empire. The little town of Wigton, in other words, has a long, long history....two thousand years of memory.

Christmas eve in Wigton is not much different from what you might find in a Dicken's novel; an English country village is the center of the Christmas universe, and we spent Christmas eve with old friends, enjoying mulled wine and good conversation, and rose early the next morning for a brisk walk in the cold air, up to the top of a hill named Walla Crag....overlooking the beautiful lake Derwentwater. This is England's version of Yosemite....lakes and mountains, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouses, calmly grazing sheep...a landscape virtually unchanged in 300 years. From there, we moved less than a mile to Castlerigg Stone Circle, one of the best known and most beautiful of the dozens of mysterious prehistoric stone circles in England.

The Castlerigg Stone circle dates to about 3,000 BCE, and while its original purpose is shrouded in the mists of time, the awe-inspiring nature of the location and the sacred positioning of the stones is unmistakable. Like its more famous cousin Stonehenge, the stones of Castlerigg line up with key astronomical events, including the rising of the sun on the winter solstice. Since we were there on December 25<sup>th</sup>, we saw that modern day pagans has bedecked some of the stones with the ancient magical plants of holly and mistletoe.

Whenever we go to visit Marian's parents, I try to visit Castlerigg, where I am always deeply moved to be in the presence of a symbol system dating back 2,000 years before the writing of the Torah and the beginnings of Judaism. And I wonder what our Jewish sages would say about my experiencing religious feelings in a place of such obviously non-Jewish power.

This year, there was more to wonder: what would the sages have thought about a family of Jews, a rabbi no less!, drinking wine with Christian friends on Christmas eve, and then making a point of visiting that ancient pagan religious site, specifically on the ancient pagan mid-winter festival.

And more: we were with Marian's sister Barbara who, like Marian, was raised by their American Jewish mother in a small and not even slightly Jewish village in England...where they grew up with the marvelous and rich English culture of pub lunches, countryside right out of Wind in the Willows, Guy Fawkes Day, ...and Christmas. Unlike Marian, Barbara did not marry a rabbi, and so Christmas is still a warm and wonderful part of her life. Seven years ago, she adopted a daughter from Guatemala...a brilliant, beautiful and exuberant little girl named Miri...and Barbara is giving her adopted daughter the best of all that she is: both Christmas...since she is English, and Hanukah, since she is Jewish.

So last Saturday night, on December 22, we held a single, multi-layered festival dinner. We celebrated Christmas, three days early, and we lit Hanukah candles two weeks late. And we did two things actually at the right time: since it was Saturday night, we made havdalah, and on exactly the correct date, we celebrated the birth seven years earlier of this little girl in Guatemala, who is growing up so far from her birth parents, truly in the words of this week's Torah portion, like Moses, a stranger in a strange land.

Miri, you should know, loves everything Jewish. Displayed prominently in her home in a large school project she did on a country of her choice...Israel. And she walked around all week singing "Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melech haolam..." When her mother gives her something, she will sing out "Todah rabbah!" And when she sees me she calls out "Hello my rabbi!!!" She also loves decorating her Christmas tree, which is draped with gorgeous Jewish stars, and traditional English Christmas cake, dense fruit cake covered with marzipan and hard white icing. And so I immediately thought of her when I received a long and anguished email from a member of our congregation...a young mother, very active in the Temple, who has just become involved in Judaism for the first time in her life...who also loves Christmas, and her non-Jewish father and his culture...and she wants to know: is it possible to be half Jewish? I read that email, and I looked at Miri and I thought to myself: IF it is possible to be half-Jewish, that is surely what Miri is. How else could she be described?

This question is alive and humming in our congregation right now; and it will grow louder as we move into the future. Can a person be half-Jewish? It is of course closely bound up with a host of other big, emotional questions: what should we think about intermarriage? Should we be encouraging non-Jews to convert to Judaism? Is Judaism passed down from the mother, as orthodox and Conservative Judaism hold, or can it be passed down by either a Jewish mother OR father, as Reform Judaism established about 25 years ago? And what is Jewish anyway? Is it a religion? An ethnicity? A culture? A tribe? And is my little niece Miri in, or out, or half-in and half-out?

The same questions can be asked about the man we meet in this week's Torah portion, the dominant human character of the remaining four books of the Torah...Moses, born to Jewish parents, perhaps...though Sigmund Freud and others have doubted that...but by any account, Moses was raised by an Egyptian princess, the daughter of the Egyptian king, in the Egyptian palace. Moses does eventually come to identify with the enslaved Hebrews as his brethren, his people, but he is always half-in, half-out. After killing the Egyptian taskmaster, he flees to Midian where he joins the household of Jethro, priest of Midian and marries Tsipporah, Jethro's daughter who bears him a son whom he names Gershom...meaning "stranger there"...adding "ki ger hayiti b'erec nochriya. For I have been a stranger in a strange land."

Near the very end of the portion, there occurs one of the strangest passages in the entire Torah. Moses is leaving Midian with his family, heading with them toward Egypt, and we read that "that night, God sought to kill him. And Tsipporah took a piece of flint and circumcised her son" and thus saved Moses' life. What on earth is going on here?

I'd like to share with you one possible interpretation...of course, not the only one...but one which brings us back to the subject of in and out.

Among his many roles in the Torah, Moses represents a huge transformation in Jewish history...it is Moses that moves us from a tribe to a religion. Before Moses, we are a clan...the family of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel.

Jewish history before Moses is the story of a group, who encounter God at occasional pivotal moments in their lives...but before Moses there is no system, no ritual, no laws. Moses is the lawgiver...he is the one who gives us Jewish religion.

Before Moses, there was only a single commandment...the first Jewish commandment...circumcision. Somehow circumcision is the one commandment, the one mitzvah, which is not about religion per se...circumcision is about being family, about being tribe. Circumcision is about biology...we mark the organ of sexual reproduction...the organ that generates family. In this bizarre, disturbing and fascinating scene, God seeks to kill Moses because he did not circumcise his son. Moses, apparently, was a man of law...not a family man. And in one of the most surprising and wonderful moments of the entire Torah, it is Moses' wife Tsipporah, his Midianite non-Jewish wife, who perceives the importance of family, of biology, of group...and who takes up the flint and circumcises her son...saving Moses' life.

Here is a meaning of this story for our congregation, and for our generation more generally. A meaning of this story that applies to my little niece Miri.

It is possible to live like Moses, half in, half out. But it is dangerous.

There is enormous creativity on that boundary—it is the place that produces Moses, and that produces Miri...the boundary is the place I discover when I travel to England on Christmas and to Castlerigg Stone Circle on Mid-winter's Day.

Venturing there is hazardous—for Moses, for me as I imagine the disapproval of the rabbinic sages, and for the members of our community who are trying to live there, half in, half out.

But stepping onto that boundary can produce new Torah...if we have a Tziporah there to save our life.

Shabbat Shalom.