

Is Shakespeare Torah?

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Last Saturday night, between the hours of midnight and 1:00AM, Marian and I found ourselves embroiled in a heated discussion with the seven other guests staying at our Bed and Breakfast in Ashland, Oregon. We had all seen the production of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, featuring Shylock, the most famous, most disturbing, and most complex Jew in the past one thousand years of western literature.

Shylock is a Jewish moneylender who extends a loan on the bizarre condition that if his wealthy enemy Antonio is not able to repay, then Shylock will extract a pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio is completely confident that he will be able to make payment, and the money is for his young friend Bassanio, whom Antonio loves, and so Antonio agrees to this strange deal. But then Antonio's ships all fail to return from their voyages, and Antonio is unable to repay the loan. To our horror, Shylock demands his bond—"I will have my bond!" he declares. Ultimately, the play ends happily....but not for the Jew. And not for the Jews in the audience.

In the living room of our Ashland B&B, nine of us...seven Jews and two non-Jews...rehashed the old debates: was Shakespeare was an anti-Semite? or is his depiction of Shylock in fact relatively sympathetic for sixteenth century England? Is Shylock driven by a demonic impulse for revenge or is he a heartbroken father, grief-stricken by the betrayal of his daughter? And is it right for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to present this play, with all of its fascinating and dangerous complexity, or should The Merchant of Venice be sealed and stored away in a vault like some hazardous biological material?

After the rest of us had been arguing for about half an hour, a young woman who had been sitting quietly among us, a school teacher from Alaska, spoke up and asked "Do you all know each other?" In fact, we had all just met. We were seven Jews, from Santa Barbara, from Connecticut, from South Africa, from England, from New York, and we were arguing with each other as though we had known each other for our whole lives.

During our week in Ashland, Marian and I enjoyed a number of surprising and wonderful Jewish encounters, including Shabbos dinner with Rabbi Marc Sirinsky and his wife Catherine, whom we had never met before, but who welcomed us into their home like long lost friends. Who knew that Ashland would be yet another secret sacred center of the Jewish universe!

And in Ashland, I found Torah—the Torah of Shakespeare.

We spent a whole week there, swimming in the vast ocean of Shakespeare's imagination, his poetic genius, his bawdy earthy humor, the famous speeches, the impossible to understand 400-year-old references and inside jokes, his fascination with the supernatural, his skepticism, and his sublime gift for observing and capturing the essence of the full range of human beings. Watching Shakespeare reminded me...precisely...of the experience of studying Torah.

Here is what both feel like: when I watch Shakespeare and when I read Torah, at first I feel small. I know that I am missing most of what is going on. I see and hear human beings, like me, speaking words that I recognize, but I cannot make out their

meaning. It feels like being a small child again in a room full of grownups. When I try to focus on a word, or a phrase or sentence, and take the time to understand it and think about it...even if I do manage to grasp that word or phrase or verse, the play...or the text...has rushed on without me. I cannot comprehend it, cannot master it. It is humbling, utterly and devastatingly humbling.

And then suddenly there comes a flash of meaning—a word spoken or bit of dialogue and I get it. Like a burst of light, the idea or emotion that first gave birth to those words... shines forth. In that wonderful moment, I feel connected...to the mind that wrote those words, and to all of the other minds who have read, and studied, and understood those words. That light, that illumination, is what our people have called Torah.

The German poet Goethe began an essay about Shakespeare with the words: “There has already been so much said about Shakespeare that it would seem as if there was nothing left to say.” He wrote that nearly two hundred years ago, in the year 1813. Since then, readers and students have Shakespeare have continued to read him, and read him, and have discovered layers upon layers of meaning that Goethe could never have imagined. With Shakespeare, like the Torah, we encounter the great mystery of infinite meaning. Plunging into the Torah, or into Shakespeare...we know that we will never reach the bottom. Both Shakespeare and the Torah take us deep into the mind of God.

Is it OK to say such a thing? Is it OK for a rabbi to say such a thing from the bimah on Friday night? Can one speak of Shakespeare and the Torah in one breath? Is Shakespeare a kind of Torah?...Is Homer Torah?, or Dante, or Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson for that matter? I’ve wondered about that question for thirty years, and am still stuck on it. Does God speak to us through the voices of all the great human authors and teachers? Are they all Torah, or is only the Torah, Torah?

Moses gives an answer in this week’s portion: “Go and ask, from the beginning of time, from the day that God created the first human being on earth, has there ever been anything like this great thing, or has anything like it ever been heard? Has any other people ever heard the voice of God, speaking from the midst of the fire, and survived?” Moses’ answer, at the end of his life, is a resounding “no.” There has never been another people who heard the voice of God.

But I’m not so sure.

This week Marian and I joined the thousands of other pilgrims, who travel constantly from all over the country, to Ashland Oregon, to Stratford Ontario, and Stratford England, and to other festivals of which I am not even aware...all coming to hear the ancient words brought to life again. We stood humbled before the majestic mountain of Shakespeare’s language, so immense, so difficult and so beautiful; we stared spellbound into the bottomless depths of his multiple meanings. We joined our thoughts and feelings with all the other worshippers and it never felt for one moment like a foreign god.

On the contrary, as I sat in Ashland’s Elizabethan theater, in the warm open air with the starry sky above, and as Feste the clown sang the end of Twelfth Night:

When that I was and a tiny little boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain.
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.

Those mysterious, enchanting, simple words reached out to each one of us gathered there, reached out to us from a wise and wonderful mind, both distant and amazingly familiar. There, as he sang and the stars shone in the sky above us, I felt more than ever the truth of Moses' greatest teaching, at the heart of our faith, and at the heart of this week's portion: Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. The Eternal our God the Eternal is One. Shabbat Shalom.