

## The Stars

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Friday, August 10, 2012

Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

Last week on Saturday afternoon, because it was Shabbat, I had **nothing to do**. To be sure, I knew that as soon as the stars appeared, I would have to swing into action: preparing remarks for a wedding on Sunday, answering emails, washing the dishes that had accumulated during Shabbat...all of that and so much more was waiting for me. But as long as it was still Shabbat, I had permission...in fact I was **commanded**...not to work. Shabbat offers that liberation to anyone suffering from the pace of modern life. So, having nothing that I **needed** to do, I went to my bookshelf and pulled off a book I had bought years ago, but never read, titled The Stars: A New Way to See Them, by H.A. Rey....and began to read.

The book is a guide to the constellations, and how to find them and remember them. I have always wished I could do better than just picking out the Big Dipper and Orion and Cassiopeia. But whenever I look up at night, either the street lights are too bright, or if I am out away from the city there are so many stars that I am quickly overwhelmed. And soon my neck starts getting tired, and so I give up...

But this book gave me hope. The author draws lines between the stars in a new way that actually makes it possible to see and to remember the pictures in heaven that were originally seen by the ancient stargazers. The shepherd, the bear, the huntsman, the dragon, the whale, the king and queen of Ethiopia, the twins, the lion, etc. The book is beautifully poetic. This is from the first page: "The space age is upon us. Rockets are leaving our globe at speeds unheard of only a few years ago, to orbit earth, moon and sun....And how has all this affected the age-old pleasure of watching the starry sky? Has it made stargazing obsolete? It has not, and it never will. For we live on this earth and always shall. After the day is gone we shall go out, breathe deeply, and look up—and there the stars will be unchanged, unchangeable..." I fell in love with the voice of this book, which reminded me of other voices from the 1950's like EB White and Thornton Wilder....highly intelligent but perfectly clear. Inspiring, and very funny.

The afternoon went by quickly, and after about four hours of careful reading and studying, I was excitedly showing my wife Marian that I could pick out not only the Big Dipper and Orion and Cassiopeia on the star maps, but also Perseus and Andromeda and Cepheus and Gemini and Draco and Lyra, and also more than half a dozen stars by name....Rigel, Arcturus, Sirius, Regulus, Gemma, Vega, Deneb, and others. Better yet, I could tell her the myth of Andromeda, the daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus, who was chained to a rock by her father, to be devoured by the Whale, but was rescued by Perseus...a story illustrated by the stars in one section of the sky. I was so grateful to this author, truly a master teacher, who was able to explain, to make clear, and to inspire me. In the back of my mind I made a mental note to look further into this author...H.A. Rey. The name rang a bell, and there was something familiar about his artwork....but then Shabbat ended and my free time was over.

Since that afternoon last Shabbat, my life has been full with the work and responsibilities of being a rabbi, a husband, a father and a son. Teaching, visiting, comforting, organizing, fundraising, writing and thinking....and I did not open The Stars,

A New Way to See Them until late last night, and realized how much I had already forgotten...and remembered how much I had loved the book. And I went to my computer to learn a little bit about H.A. Rey, the author.

Hans Augusto Reyersbach was a German Jew, born in Hamburg in 1898. He served in the German army in World War I, and after the war he painted circus posters for a living. He made his way to Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1920's looking for a job, and ended up selling bathtubs in the Amazon. In Brazil, he met a fiery young Jewish woman...also from Hamburg...named Margerete Waldstein. He had actually known her as a young girl, and now Hans and Margrete, two German Jews in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1930's, fell in love, married, became Brazilian citizens and changed their last name to Rey...REY....easier for Brazilians to pronounce than Reyersbach. They went to Paris for their honeymoon, and ended up staying there, in Montmartre where they wrote and illustrated children's books. Their biggest success was called "Raffy and the Nine Monkeys." The most popular character being the youngest monkey, named Fifi, who was always getting into trouble but finding his way out.

In September 1939 the Second World War broke out and in May 1940 the Germans invaded Holland and Belgium and refugees began pouring into Paris. Hans built two bicycles from spare parts and Hans and Margret joined a flood of millions of refugees streaming south. They hid in farmhouse, and then a stable, and thanks to their Brazilian citizenship, managed to get visas to Spain, then to Lisbon and finally back to Rio. From Rio they sailed to New York and in October 1941, they published the story of Fifi the little monkey, **renamed..... Curious George**.

I realize that some of you may not be familiar with the Curious George books. But for me, my brother and sister, Curious George was a sacred text, teaching the wisdom that a full and enjoyable life demands a certain amount of risk-taking and rule-breaking, and that the universe is a basically safe place...most of the time. It came as a stunning and deeply pleasurable shock that the mysterious teacher behind my book about the stars was the author of Curious George...a Jew, who began painting Circus posters in Hamburg, then selling bathtubs in the Amazon, then escaping with his wife on homemade bicycles from Nazi occupied France, and finally became a celebrated illustrator/author of both Curious George AND a brilliant and influential guide to viewing the stars and the constellations.

Now I want to know "who was H.A. Rey as Jew?" There is no mention of Judaism anywhere in Curious George, or in The Stars, A New Way to See Them. And yet, both Hans and Margret were Jews. It's the very first fact mentioned on their biography on Wikipedia.

What about his deep love of learning and the intense desire to teach, to share his knowledge? It feels Jewish. Listen to his voice: "Night after night the stars are there. And night after night they arouse our curiosity, our urge for knowledge. Stone age or space age, man will be asking the question his grandparents have asked before him and his grandchildren will ask after him: What star is that?"

When he wrote those words, did H.A Rey know, had he heard the words of the Prophet Isaiah which we read just last week, the final verse of the haftarah on Shabbat morning, "Lift your eyes on high, and see -Who created these? Who sends forth the army of stars...**each one of them He calls by name.**" I know that we Jews are not the only people to have looked in wonder up to the heavens. All human beings throughout

time have looked to the stars in awe and wonder. This week our entire nation has been watching the heavens, and the stunning landing of the Mars rover, searching for life on Mars, whose name H.A. Rey would have loved—Curiosity!! But I want to know about this man, H. A. Rey, whose little monkey taught me about risk-taking and rule-breaking, and whose words and drawings have now opened for me the mystery of the stars and their stories. He was a Jew....in what way? He loved knowledge; he taught the power of curiosity. What did Torah mean to him?

And his appreciation of the delicate balance between being good and rule-breaking. Did he learn that from his Jewish parents?

Did he ever experience the quiet of a Shabbat afternoon, completely free of the burdens and responsibilities of his workweek? In the peaceful emptiness of a Shabbat afternoon, did he ever go to his bookshelf and pick out an old book which opened his eyes to a new way of seeing?

He wrote: "After the day is gone we shall go out, breathe deeply, and look up—and there the stars will be unchanged, unchangeable..." Did he ever go out of his house on a Saturday evening, and seeing the first three stars appear, chant blessings over wine, spices, a braided candle...the blessings of havdalah. Did he ever sing the hymn of Saturday night, Hamvdil Bein Kodesh L'Chol, each stanza of which ends with hakochavim balaila, the stars appearing at night? I don't think I will ever know, but I'm curious!

Shabbat Shalom.