

# Calling Santa Barbara Home

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Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

One hundred years ago, exactly, in the spring of 1916, Carobeth Tucker was twenty-one years old when she moved to the Santa Ynez Valley to marry her Linguistics teacher John Peabody Harrington. Brilliant and eccentric, Harrington spent decades sitting with the last native speakers of the Chumash language, writing down their words and stories. If not for Harrington, the Chumash language would have been lost completely. One of his primary sources was an ancient woman named Maria Solares, and young Carobeth who was able to communicate with Maria in Spanish heard from the old Indian woman some of the old Chumash stories.

Maria told Carobeth that when she was young, she had heard from her elders of a time before cattle were brought into the region to graze, when wild oats and other grasses grew waist high, or even shoulder high, and among the grasses, the lupine and other wildflowers all grew lush and tall...not stunted as we see them now. In those days, the hunters did not have to go afield, because deer and elk fed right outside the doors of the houses of the People. That was in the good years. But once there came a great drought; the game went away and there were no acorns, no seeds to gather, and no roots to dig. This went on for several years, and many people died. Women put hot water on their breasts, to make milk, to give their men strength, and all the fragments of deerskin...even the moccasins...were boiled and chewed. When finally everyone had resigned themselves to death, a runner came from over the mountains, from the village where Gaviota is now. He cried out that a whale had been stranded on the beach. The people streamed over the rugged mountain passes and down to the sea, carrying those who were too feeble to walk. There they feasted and grew strong. The whale was big enough to nourish many people for a long time. When it was all gone, the rains came again, and the grasses and the game.

When I came across this story a few months ago, I wondered how I could have lived in Santa Barbara for over thirty years and never heard this extraordinary story of the place where I live. In fact, it has slowly dawned upon me that I know almost nothing about this place where Marian and I have raised our children. We live here; we own our house. We vote in elections. We see people we know almost everywhere we go. But we don't know a single Santa Barbara story. I don't think I am alone.

For a Jew, it takes a long time to call a place home. We understand ourselves as wanderers, as exiles. Our guest speaker last week, Rabbi Seidler-Feller, spoke to us of exile as the secret of Jewish survival. As he pointed out, most of our great stories are about going into exile. Abraham leaves home. Rebekah leaves home. Jacob leaves home. Joseph leaves home. Moses leaves home. Adam and Eve...the first human beings...are expelled from the Garden, their home. The Torah seems to see exile as fundamental to the Jewish and human condition...a necessary stage in our spiritual development.

And that is exactly what I have always thought and felt. Here in Santa Barbara, I am in exile....far from home. I am from the East Coast. My land, my birthplace, my father's house is Rochester New York, and before that on my mother's side from Bialystok and Crimea and Israel and on my father's side from Bayonne, New Jersey, and before that from Minsk and Crakow. Those are the places that shaped me.

For thirty years I have lived here in Santa Barbara without curiosity about local history. Without learning the names of the Channel Islands. Without knowing the names of the wildflowers. With no sense that this place might have a claim on me....that I could live here and be at home. Now, my father has died and my mother is talking about moving to Boston, to be close to my sister. Rochester is slipping away from me. If I want a home, somewhere on this earth, it looks like it will have to be Santa Barbara. How do we make a place home? I think it's all about stories.

The Chumash lived here for more than ten thousand years. The oldest verified human skeletal remains in the western hemisphere were found on Santa Rosa Island...Arlington Spring Man, who it turns out was a woman, lived 13,000 years ago. And the DNA evidence indicates that she was probably related genetically to the Chumash. The Chumash lived on this land, in an intimate closeness with this land for far longer than there have been Jews on this planet. Already I am interested, but I am also puzzled by why I was not interested before.

For several years, I have led our first and second graders on a hike up Stevens Trail, from Stevens Park, stopping with them under huge oak trees and allowing them to climb over the huge rocks and then telling them the story of Jacob sleeping out on the road for the first time in his life, placing a rock under his head for a pillow and dreaming of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on the ladder. It has been very good to connect the Torah with that experience of the outdoors. Only recently when I glanced at a map of the trail did I see a note indicating bedrock grinding mortars at one point on the trail. When I looked more carefully, yes, right there in front of my nose, is an outcropping of bedrock with four or five very clear bowls that have been carved out of the rock, and which were clearly used....for many many years....for grinding acorns into flour. Last year one of our brightest children demanded to know: why those people do not live here any more. And what happened to them? Why? He wanted to know. When our children start asking those questions, and we are forced to dig deep to tell a new story that is true, and that they can understand....then this place becomes home.

Do you know the story of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island? It is a true Santa Barbara story, made famous by the classic children's book *Island of the Blue Dolphin*. In 1853, an otter hunter named George Nidiver and his party found a windbreak on San Nicolas island made of whale ribs and sticks and covered with brush. Inside was a woman, clothed in a dress of skins and cormorant feathers. She offered them some wild onions that she had roasted. With their encouragement, she gathered up her few possessions and followed them to her boat. They brought her to Santa Barbara, where she caused a sensation, entertaining people with singing and dancing. She communicated with sign language and pantomime, but since her people were not Chumash, no one could speak her language. She had been living alone on the island for eighteen years. Now, in the company of people, she showed a

childlike delight in new people, experiences and foods, but heartbreakingly, died after only seven weeks...her digestive system apparently could not handle the new food. Her grave is at the Santa Barbara Mission. We make this our home when we tell her story and think of her when we drive or walk past the Mission, or look out at the islands and get a lump in our throat thinking of her.

In the 1920's and 30's, there was an oil field at Ellwood, very near where I live. In 1934 a Japanese merchant ship docked near Ellwood and the captain, named Kozo Nishino, came ashore. He was walking near today's Sandpiper Golf Course and tripped and fell into a cactus. Overcome with pain and humiliation, he could not help noticing a group of oil workers nearby laughing at him. This is a true story. The story continues eight years later, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when on February 23, 1942, a Japanese submarine surfaced off the Ellwood shore and fired approximately twelve shells at the vicinity of the Ellwood Oil Field. It was the only direct attack on the American mainland during World War II. The commander of that submarine...was Kozo Nishino. When we walk with our children, or by ourselves, out on the Ellwood bluffs, and tell Kozo Nishino's story, and laugh....but then think further and imagine his pain and his anger, and the death and horror of the attack on Pearl Harbor...then this place, and its stories, begin to sink deep into our consciousness. And this place becomes home.

Finally, it is time for us to tell our own story....the story of our people here in Santa Barbara. How many of us know the names, the personalities, the funny incidents and the tragedies that make up the story of Jewish Santa Barbara? There is an entire Torah to be written. An entire Talmud. Perhaps we thought that the Jewish story was happening somewhere else....in New York, or in Israel, or Los Angeles. But in fact it is happening right here and right now. This is where we live. This is our home. Let the storytelling begin!