

Parshat Nitzavim

We read in our parsha this morning that at particular moment in time, our ancestors, all of them, were standing tall before God, by the river Jordan - the leaders, the elders, the officers, the children, the women, the ger, even the woodcutters and the water carriers.

Moshe Rabbeinu, in the last moments of his life, was sharing his final words of wisdom to his people, who were about to cross over into a new life and a new land, from one generation, to a very new and different generation.

It's always fascinating to think about the stories that get passed down from generation to generation. Once in the early 1990's, our family had gathered around my grandmother to record our family history...at the time, she was in her late 80's and her memory was beginning to fade - the thoughts weren't all coming out as they had in the earlier years, and sometimes, there were even a few surprises.

One such surprise came as she was telling about the various aunts and the uncles, and what they did for a living and what they did for fun. And then she came to Uncle Joe - but she was confused. Did Uncle Joe live in Albany or Troy? It couldn't be both, could it? Was he grandma's uncle, or grandpa's uncle? First, she had him living in one place, and then he had disappeared, and then he was back. Where had he been? Grandma, where was Uncle Joe?

And then, out of nowhere, came those immortal words: No, that's my uncle Joe, I'm talking about dad's uncle Joe, 'Joe the jailbird' who spent time in prison...and so it turned out, after all of those years, we found out the great blemish of Strosberg history - that our great-great uncle, Joe Strosberg was, in fact, a convicted felon and spent time behind bars. Despite all of my grandmother's stories up to that point, we weren't perfect after all.

A tale is told that when the son of the Tzemach Tzedek was born, his father, the great Rebbe of Lubavich, recited the Kriyat Hashem, the blessing naming the newborn, and out came the name, Shmuel. Nobody got the name. (In the great rabbinic dynasties, the practice was to name a child after a deceased relative - and there were no relatives named Shmuel.) At the festive meal, one of the older sons approached his father, the Tzemach Tzedek, and asked: Who is Shmuel named after? After all, we don't have a Shmuel in our family. And the son went on, in a whisper: Is he named after Samuel the prophet?

And the Tzemach Tzedek answered, No, he was named after Samuel the water carrier of Polutzk, whose name was Shmuel. Apparently, the water carrier of Polutz was worthy of having his name carried on in the family of the Tzemach Tzedek.

Now it could be that the Rebbe was teaching his son that all of God's children are gifts to the world, even the water carrier...but it could also be that Shmuel the water carrier had earned his legacy, that he had done something special for the Tzemach Tzedek of Lubavich. But whatever it was, that water carrier was awarded his legacy.

Our stories are as unique as they are common, just like the Shoev Mayim, the water carrier of Palutz, whose, to us, sounds like a simple soul whose job it was to carry water, but in reality, was a son and grandson, and likely, a father and grandfather as well, and who ultimately saw his legacy through the son of the Tzemach Tedek.

It's fascinating to follow our ancestors throughout the world as we trace our history. How does God keep up with everything? How do we find God wherever we find ourselves or in Rosh Hashanah terms, how do we do teshuva, how do we return to our true selves, connected to God, despite everything that happens in our lives?

Sometimes, surprisingly, God finds us:

In 1990 Elie Wiesel visited Saragossa. Like most tourists, he visited the sites as well as the impressive cathedral. While walking through the Church, a man approached him speaking French and offered to be his guide. In the course of their conversation, it came out that Wiesel was Jewish and spoke Hebrew.

The man exclaimed: "I've never met a Jewish person before, but I have something I have to show you. Maybe you can tell me what it is." The men walked to the Spaniard's apartment, and when they arrived, he took out an old manuscript. "Is this Hebrew?" the man asked, "My family has passed it down for generations. We were told that if it were destroyed, we would bring a curse on our family."

In fact, it was Hebrew and it was almost 500 years old. Wiesel began to tremble as he read the document. Slowly he translated it for his host: "I, Moshe Ben Avraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, it's head held high under the sun without fear or remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written in Saragossa, the 9th of Av, in the year of punishment and exile. [which was 1492]

"What's the meaning of this document?" asked the alarmed Spaniard, who had assumed it was some kind of amulet. The man knew nothing about the history of Spanish Jewry or the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. In fact, until that moment he considered being called "Judeo" an insult. As Wiesel told him the story of our people, his eyes grew wider and wider.

Wiesel and the man parted ways and it was not until a few years later that Wiesel understood what had happened that day. While visiting Jerusalem Wiesel was accosted on the street by a stranger. In broken Hebrew he said, "Mr. Wiesel: Shalom! Don't you recognize me? Saragossa!" It was his guide.

Once again, the man from Saragossa invited Wiesel back to his apartment, explaining how he had come to Israel, studied Judaism, and returned to the religion of his ancestors. When they entered the apartment, Wiesel knew why they had come. On the wall hung the old document he had read years before. As Wiesel studied it again, the man smiled and said: "I haven't told you my new name: Moshe ben Avraham."

Because sometimes God finds us. Our stories may not be as dramatic as Moshe ben Avraham, but in many, often subtle ways, God reaches out to all of us in our lives to get us to notice and to appreciate the Holy One. It may be the car accident that you walked away from without a scratch, a new job or promotion that you weren't expecting or a recovery from a serious illness. God is intimately involved in our lives in so many ways. It's up to us to pay attention.

May God inscribe and seal us, all of us, even the water carriers, for a good, sweet, healthy, and a happy New Year.