

THE MAN ON THE BIMA

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

He ascended the steps to the bimah, the platform where the Torah is read, with the strangely hurried movements of someone who would rather be traveling the other way.

This middle-aged fellow, apparently something of a stranger to a shul, had just been "called up" from his seat in the back of the small shul to make the blessing on the Torah.

They get so nervous, I thought to my cynical, teen-age self that day several decades ago; they should really come more than just a few times a year, if only to get the feel of things. The blessings, after all, are not very long, the Hebrew not particularly tongue-twisting. "Asher Bochar Banu Mikol Ho'amim (who has chosen us from among all nations)" - I prompted him in my mind - "V'nosan lonu es Toraso (and has given us His Torah)."

C'mon, man, you can do it.

His life was passing before his very eyes; you could tell. The occasion, for the man on the bima, was both momentous and terrifying.

Then he did something totally unexpected, something that made me smirk at first, but then made me think, - and made me realize something profound about our precious people.

He made a mistake.

Not entirely unexpected. Many a shul-goer, especially the occasional one, leaves out words here and there, reverses the order, or draws a traumatic blank when faced with sudden holiness of the Torah. That would have been unremarkable. But this congregant was different.

His mistake was fascinating. "Asher bochar bonu" he intoned, a bit unsure of himself, "mikol," slight hesitation, "... haleylos shebechol haleylos anu ochlim."

The poor fellow had jumped the track of the Torah blessing and was barreling along with the Four Questions a Jewish child asks at the Passover seder! "Who has chosen us from... all other nights, for on all other nights we eat..."!!

For the first second or two it was humorous. But then it struck me.

The hastily corrected and embarrassed man had just laid bare the scope of his Jewishness. He had revealed all the associations Judaism still held for him - all that was left of a long, illustrious rabbinic line, for all I knew.

My first thoughts were sad... I imagined a shtetl in Eastern Europe, an old observant Jew living in physical poverty but spiritual wealth. I saw him studying through the night, working all day to support his wife and children, one of whom later managed to survive Hitler's Final Solution to make it to America and gratefully sire a single heir, the man on the bimah.

We have so much to set right, I mused, so many souls to reach, just to get to where we were a mere 60 years ago.

But then it dawned on me. Here stood a man sadly inexperienced in things Jewish, virtually oblivious to rich experiences of his ancestral faith.

And yet , he knows the Four Questions.

By heart.

When he tries to recite the blessing over the Torah, the distance between him and his heritage cannot keep those Four Questions from tiptoeing in, unsummoned but determined. The seder is a part of his essence.

I recall a conversation I once had with a secular Jewish gentleman married to a non-Jewish woman and not affiliated with any Jewish institution. His en passant mention of Passover prompted me to ask him if he had any plans for the holiday.

He looked at me as if I were mad.

"Why, we're we planning an elaborate seder, as always."

Astonished at the sudden revelation of a vestige of religious custom in his life, I told him as much. He replied, matter of factly, he would never think of abolishing his Passover seder. I didn't challenge him.

When living in Northern California, I became acquainted with other Jewish families seemingly devoid of religious practice. I always made a point of asking whether a seder of any sort was celebrated on Passover. Almost invariably, the answer was... yes, of course.

It is striking. There are more types of haggadahs than other volume in the immense literary repertoire of the Jewish people. The Sixties saw a "civil-rights haggadah" and a "Soviet Jewry haggadah." Nuclear disarmament and vegetarian versions followed. At the core of each was the age-old recounting of the ancient story of the Jews leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah. It is as if Jews , wherever the circumstances may leave them, feel a strange compulsion to preserve the Passover seder and its lessons whatever the costs, and whatever the form most palatable to their momentary persuasions.

Events that took place millennia ago - pivotal events in the history of the Jewish nation - are regularly and openly commemorated by millions of Jews the world over, many of whom do so out

of an inner motivation they themselves cannot explain.

They may not even realize what they are saying when they read their haggadahs, beyond the simplest of its ideas: a Force saved their forefathers from terrible enemies and entered into a covenant with them and their descendants.

But that is apparently enough.

A spiritual need that spawns an almost hypnotic observance of the seder by Jews the world over is satisfied. And even if, after the seder, mothers and fathers go back to decidedly less than Jewishly observant lives, their daughters and sons have received the message.

As did their parents when they were young, and their parents before them.

The seed is planted.

The seder is indisputably child-oriented. Recitations that can only be described as children's songs are part of the haggadah's text, and various doings at the seder are explained by the Talmud as intended for the sole purpose of stimulating the curiosity of the young ones.

For the children are the next generation of the Jewish nation; and the seder is the crucial act of entrusting the most important part of their history to them, for re-entrustment to their own young in due time.

And so, in the spring of each year, like the birds compelled to begin their own season of rebirth with song, Jews feel the urge to sing as well. They sing to their young ones, as their ancestors did on the banks of the Red Sea, and the song is a story. It tells of their people and how the Creator of all adopted them. And if, far along the line, a few - even many - of us fall from the nest, all is not lost. For we remember the song.

Just like the man on the bimah.

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