

Shavuot 2011

The Festival of Pentecost was originally recorded simply the 50th day after the Children of Israel left Egypt; the ceremonies related to it were exclusively concerned with the summer harvest and agriculture. "Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk" is mentioned three times in the Torah, all within a harvest context.

There's a cute old joke. God tells Moses, "Moses, do not boil a kid in its mother's milk."

Moses says, "Oh, you must mean we should not eat milk and meat together."

"Moses," says God, "I repeat: Do not boil a kid in its mother' milk."

"Oh," says Moses, "what you really mean is that we should wait six hours after eating meat before we can have milk."

"Moses, for the third time: Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk."

"God, what I am hearing is that we should have separate dishes for milk and meat."

"OK, Moses," says God, "I give up. Have it your way."

But behind the joke is the inevitable fact that any constitution requires constant reinterpretation, and development, and never remains static. The age old problem is how to find a balance of remaining true to the core spiritual values while coping with changing external and material conditions. This is at the center of the issue of how to define Jewish identity. Some move so far towards redefining their Jewish obligations that they lose sight of the original spiritual content. Others refuse to be creative and lose the dynamism inherent in Torah.

This is precisely how Shavuot came to be associated with Sinai. It wasn't just a matter of working out the calendar and seeing that the Sinai Revelation worked out on that day. It was the larger issue. Freedom from slavery can only be a first step. Throwing off shackles enables one to move. But where one moves to is still the real problem. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Arab world today where it remains to be seen if freedom will lead to enlightenment or to obscurantism and fanaticism. And no revolution, no exodus proceeds smoothly and without reverse.

We too have issues we need to face. Just getting our land was not enough. As soon as we got it, we all but lost it because we abandoned our religious identity and fought amongst ourselves. We were ejected from the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and then from Judea in 586 BCE. We came back and then lost it again to the Romans in 70 CE. The prophets and then the rabbis all argued that we ourselves were the architects of our own demise.

I wonder in what we are different today? Is it land that matters or God? If

it is our relationship with God, in what way should we acting religiously? If religion is being used against us as it is, then we must use religion back. But what kind of religion? Everyone, every sect, every denomination seems to believe it is right and everyone else is wrong. Is this the human condition? Constant disagreement and conflict? It seems so.

I would argue that it is obvious that the Torah, our constitution, is what has kept us alive as a distinct body of people. But at the same time it has been its very flexible membrane that has enabled it to survive as a "broad church", to incorporate so many different manifestations and degrees of religiosity. Of course there have been internal religious wars—Sadducees and Pharisees, Rabbanites and Kaarites, Chasidim and Mitnagdim, rationalists and mystics, Orientals and Occidentals, Orthodox and Reform. Yet the glue that held us together was the text of Sinai, however differently we interpreted it or how seriously we took it or not.

I may not like the plumber, but I need him when my toilet gets blocked. I may not want to worship as regularly as a Chasid, but I may need him to make up a minyan when my parents die. I may not agree with a pork-eating Reform Jew, but I will need his support politically and financially on matters of common concern. If, God forbid, we lose our land again, we will still survive but it will be our religious tradition that will achieve it as it did before. I cannot control politicians, generals or fanatics. I can only control myself.

The message of Sinai to me is that there was moment of unity. We all stood there: our Korach's who rebelled against Moses, as well as our Pinchas's who played the zealots, our 'Eirev Rav' mixed multitude of non-Jewish fellow travelers as well as our priests. We were together there for that moment.

When I will be teaching at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan for the Tikkun Leil Shavuot, there in the building will be a complete spectrum all that night. Some will come to study Torah and others for a midnight dip! Some will dance Chasidic dances and others the Horah. Some to participate and others to observe. And the only thing they will all have in common is that they are there because it is Shavuot. It won't solve any of our problems, but it will show that it doesn't all have to be conflict.