

June 2007

Dear Friends,

As a thirteen year old, Hildy Martin did not have the opportunity to mark this special birthday with the Jewish coming of age ritual of a bat mitzvah. As an adult, she decided it was not too late to express her reverence for God and Judaism through the rituals usually associated with bnei mitzvah. For the past three years, Hildy, a PJC congregant, prepared to read from the Torah, Haftarah, lead part of the Shabbat morning service, and teach Torah. The process has been a significant part of her personal religious journey, and her special day was incredibly important to our synagogue, as Hildy proved to all of us that it is never too late to study. She did a beautiful job, and the fact that she learned to read Hebrew just a year and a half before she chanted from the Torah and Haftarah inspired everyone who was privileged to be a part of this day. Her d'var torah touched people in a deep way, and folks have continued to talk about it and roll it around in their thoughts. I have decided to post her words on our website so her torah will be broadly accessible. Mazal Tov to Hildy and the entire Martin family! Hildy's d'var torah is below.

Rabbi David A. Schuck

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### **D'var Torah, Parashat Sh'lach L'cha**

#### **Hildy Martin**

I am a traveler who does not pack lightly. I like to take as much with me wherever I go “just in case.” When I left home to go to college, I was probably the only student to arrive at school as a freshman with a mini U-Haul attached to a station wagon. I needed my belongings with me so I would not feel strange or uncomfortable in my new surroundings. I needed my familiar things so I could make a place for myself and fit in.

And so it was with the other familiar things I brought with me as I began my adult life away from my family. I carried a head full of memories, advice and Yiddish wisdom I might need. My mother had filled me with these necessary warnings and admonishments as many other mothers had taught their daughters. “Don’t go out at night alone”, “Don’t talk to strangers,” “Wear clean underwear- you never know when you’ll be in a car accident”, “Don’t talk with your mouth full, you might choke” and “Man plans, and G-d laughs.” It was this last bit that stuck with me.

The G-d my mother spoke of was not one I knew that intimately. Yet he was always there, waiting for me to make a plan and then strike it down at the last minute.

The Israelites, as they wandered in the desert were also not traveling lightly, carrying with them their own perceptions of G-d. Weighted down with a view of G-d that was overshadowed with negativity and fear.

The Israelites escaped Egypt and slavery with the help of G-d. They witnessed his strength in the destruction of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. But in Exodus 14:30 the people not only “... saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord.”

At Sinai the people experience the visible and physical signs of G-d as he delivers the Ten Commandments. “All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. ‘You speak to us ‘they said to Moses, ‘and we will obey; but let G-d not speak to us lest we will die.’” (Exodus 20: 15-17)

They were afraid of hearing the voice of such a powerful G-d. They did not believe that they would be safe listening to G-d let alone directing themselves toward G-d and speaking to him.

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It was unusual for my mother to speak of G-d. We were not observant. We did not belong to a synagogue or celebrate holidays other than Hanukah and Passover. G-d was not popular in our household- a household that had seen a lot of tragedy- a son retarded and dying young, a husband dying suddenly at 52, the early loss of parents and in-laws. Sudden illnesses and deaths dominated our lives and it seemed that G-d was directly responsible for all these unexpected misfortunes. How could anyone trust in a G-d like that?

This view of G-d was passed on to me. L'dor va dor. I grew up thinking that G-d was there to await seeing you happy and then invent some way to make it all go away – quickly and without you anticipating a thing. However what happened is that what I came to anticipate was G-d taking everything away. So instead of seeing G-d as a G-d to be praised or enjoyed, revered or loved I grew up a stranger to G-d - knowing only a wrathful and vengeful side- not necessarily in response to bad behavior but a capricious G-d, giving and taking away things at will.

I carried this view with me wherever I went, even into marriage and motherhood. My views of G-d persisted throughout my early adulthood because I did not have another item in my religious carry-on to replace it with. Even experiencing happiness and success, joy and love did not change this image of G-d for me. I could not associate the pleasurable times in my life with G-d because the G-d I knew about was a G-d that took away those moments replacing them with sadness or sorrow. Happiness actually became something to worry about- when would it end? When would G-d notice I was feeling good and “life was beautiful” - when would G-d start laughing at my plans again?

Having this view of G-d made the High Holidays very scary. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were fraught with great overtones of fear. I remember asking a rabbi when I was in my early thirties if there actually was a book that I was being

written down in. The thought terrified me. I could picture the year my father died and how he had been written down on the who's to die list. How frightening was that image of G-d. I was such a stranger to a G-d of compassion and understanding and I did not even realize it.

Not recognizing G-d's presence is an ancient Israelite condition since the beginning of time. In Genesis 28:16 Jacob awakes from his dream at Beth El and says "surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it."

When the Israelites can not find water in the desert they question why they have been brought out of Egypt to die of thirst. Their questioning is not simply about their thirst for water but about their lack of belief that G-d will be there for them at this juncture. Exodus 17: 7 describes the place being called Meribah because "they ( the Israelites) tried the Lord, saying "Is the Lord present among us or not?"

In today's parsha, the scouts G-d has commanded Moses to send out to Canaan have returned convinced the people they saw there were giants. We see how the majority of the scouts lacked a vision of a G-d who would help them conquer their fears. They did not recognize the possibility of G-d being available to them. Like Jacob, the Israelites at Meribah and myself they were unaware that they were in a place with G-d.

Caleb and Joshua in (Shelah-Lekha 14:9) admonish their fellow scouts, reassuring the community to "Have no fear of the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them, but the LORD is with us. "

But the other scouts are so incapable of recognizing G-d's availability that they want to pelt Caleb and Joshua with stones for their optimistic report. Ironically it is G-d's presence at the Tent of Meeting that prevents the Israelites from carrying out the stoning.

The Israelites' long desert journey would require them to make some shifts and

changes in their view of G-d. In order to have a working relationship with G-d they needed to move from the G-d they were scared to be near, toward a G-d that could help them become a people, put their trust in and love. The Israelites needed to stop collecting evidence of G-d's wrath but add to their theo-vision a G-d masterful yet not destructive, forgiving not vindictive or punishing, a figure that deserved reverence but not fear. A G-d that would stand beside them in difficult times.

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Being part of a synagogue was not enough to change my view of G-d . And to be honest it has been a slow and gradual change. It takes a great deal of time and energy to unpack and repack baggage you have been carrying for so long.

When I first started to come to shul and daven ,the prayers we were saying ( for me in English or transliterated Hebrew) were so new. I was learning a new way to speak about G-d. Here in the siddur was a G--d worthy or praise and devotion. A G-d people thought of as sovereign, holy and to be revered. I could not believe the words I was reading. I recall thinking if when I read revered did they mean feared. I could not accept the difference between the G-d I knew from my growing up and this G-d I was reading about.

I was comforted by reading Tehillim-psalms. In them I found a G-d capable of more than just retribution. In Psalm 30: "Here O Hashem and favor me. Hashem, Be My helper. You have transformed my lament into dancing for me. You undid my sackcloth and You girded me with gladness." This was a different kind of a G-d, a G-d that could help one when difficult situations presented themselves. A G-d possibly waiting to bring joy after nights of darkness, instead of darkness after joy.

My favorite prayer became MODIM- a part of the Amidah. Here was G-d as a rock and a shield. Someone worthy of thanks- morning noon and night (not for major changes in our lives) but for miracles which daily attend us evening,

morning and noon. If we were thanking G-d for wondrous kindnesses then surely this was something G-d was interested in doing. Here was a G-d that did not have to save people from dying but was a G-d that gave us light each morning, or a smile from a spouse or child or a kind word from a neighbor. A G-d that was not out to “get “me because I was happy but might even be someone I could put my hope in.

An entirely different G-d became available to me through prayer. And it was this G-d that could invite me to be part of a world where he would no longer be a stranger to me- nor I to him. But someone I would be willing to get to know. Not someone I was too scared to even think about.

I began to pray regularly. Wednesday mornings, -Friday nights and Saturdays. I read the Pirke Avot – the words of Our Fathers and more Psalms. I took Rabbi Schuck’s Intro to Judaism class and studied the Torah. All of these experiences helped me to replace the mocking, laughing, destructive G-d with a G-d waiting to help us rebuild, a forgiving and loving G-d who helps those who stumble and fall.

It is this G-d that I can have a relationship with. I could never imagine doing anything but begging my old g-d not to shmeis me or hurt those I love. But this new G-d who I am no longer estranged from- I can have a conversation with about my new learning, about Torah, about the problems in the world and how G-d can help. It is this new G-d who has helped me envision a Jewish way of life- learning Torah, doing chesed and tzedekah and trying to follow the mitzvot.

My struggle to find and recognize a G-d who would be loving and caring, present and available to me is the same struggle we find among the Israelites in the Torah. Through my studies I have realized, that our ancestors, who had direct experiences with G-d, dragged behind them a U –Haul full of perceptions of a G-d who was absent or vengeful.

I am starting to unpack my u-haul. I am settling into a home where G-d is no longer an unexpected and unwelcome visitor. He is there when I light my Shabbat candles; he is there when I clap and sing as loud as I can at shul each Friday night. He is there when I visit Israel. He is the G-d I found in our prayers- helpful, forgiving, loving, worthy of praise and thanks. Someone I would never want to be a stranger. I am glad I have opened the door and let him in.