

Dvar Shabbat Bereshit – October 1, 2010 / 24 Tishrei 5771 – Mary Otts  
Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

My childhood memories are rich with the voice of the older priest. A touch of Irish brogue melted into his Chicago accent as he gave his sermons that juggled the necessary preaching of the weighty, lesson-filled parables with his more native love of really bad jokes, including the following limerick:

*The wind was blowing out of doors,  
The snow was piling high.  
And I could see the pedestrians,  
As they were passing by.*

*The faces of my Irish friends,  
Came dimly through the glass.  
As they trudged those icy streets,  
To worship at their Mass.*

*I watched awhile; went back to bed,  
And cuddled safe and sound.  
As they braved those icy roads,  
On sacred duty bound.*

*I envy them their strength of heart,  
The faith that they renew,  
But on an ice cold Sunday morning,  
It's so good to be a Jew.*

I spent much time at St. Bernadette Church. On Friday mornings there were school Masses where the whole of the adjacent school was marched over to the parish church with Father Rudden. A good portion of my life was spent in the quintessential Catholic pose: on my knees in the pews of that church. There were first communions, confessions, confirmations, Sunday masses with my parents, funerals, All Saints Days, and Ascensions. After 40 days of Lent and hundreds of Hail Mary's, one was tired. A young lady's proper kneel fell more into prostration towards Mecca as the backside rested against the wooden seat behind, the back arched and the head slumped, forehead touching the folded hands resting on the back of the seat in front of her. Though I remember with fondness the priest of my growing years, I do not miss the kneelers that never seemed to be padded well enough for anyone.

As we begin the process of unfolding this week's parashah, we are swallowed into the unrestrained void and the deep waters. G-d calls a limitless light into being and, from the expanse of the water, a vast sky is formed. The waters are corralled into the seas, giving room to the firmament. There are the creeping plants with their seeds to spread themselves across the earth. The light of the sun radiates the day and the moon glows throughout the night. Swarms of creatures, schools of fish and flocks of birds are created and commanded to fill the earth, the waters and the skies.

Presumably, one of the main characters of this story is created on this day: the *nachash*, the serpent, who is later cursed with the words, “Because you did this, cursed are you more than all the livestock and all the wild beasts. On your belly you shall crawl, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life.” (Genesis 3:14) The serpent slithers, slinks, hides and flees and, therefore, becomes the foil for our other main character.

Genesis 2:7 states, “And G-d formed (*vayyitzer*) man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life and, thus, man became a living soul.” We are “*vayyitzer*,” as opposed to the “*vayitzer*” of the animals. Rashi comments that Adam’s creation, elicits an extra yud because, unlike the animals, we are able to stand in judgment. Rashi goes on to say, “Cattle and beasts were also called living souls, but this one of man is the most alive of them all, because he was additionally given intelligence and speech.”

Adam is the meeting point of the horizontal and vertical axes. While there is the vastness of the sky, the expanse of the waters, the creeping of the plants and the swarming of the creatures, while these creations move outward, the adam stands. The adam is the vertical in a horizontal world. It is, in fact, Adam’s primary purpose to act as the perpendicular intermediary between heaven and earth. Adam is differentiated from all other creations because Adam is formed to stand upright, however awkwardly.

And yet, Adam takes the first opportunity to act as the serpent does, by crawling with shame into the bushes. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve hide in the bushes. The first word issued forth in the dialogue between G-d and man is: “*Ayekah?*” - “Where are you?” And when asked what happened, Adam says, “The woman that you gave to be with me - she gave me what I ate from the tree.” And when G-d asks Eve, Eve says, “The serpent seduced me and I ate [it].” And so, G-d punishes them and takes away the ground they have to “stand” on. G-d banishes them from Eden. The sin of this parashah has nothing to do with an apple. The sin of this parashah is in not being that to which we are created.

A few chapters later in our parashah, Adam and Eve’s banishment from Eden is echoed by the narrative of their son, Cain. G-d inquires of Cain: “Where is your brother?” and, again, when he now does not take responsibility; when he answers with the now famous words, “*Hashomer achi anochi?*” – “Am I my brother’s keeper?” G-d condemns him for slaying his brother. He is cursed to wander – to a life with no ground under his feet. Ramban comments from Cain’s perspective, “Since I will be a fugitive and a wanderer and unable to stand in one place, behold I am banished from the land: there is no place where I can find rest. And I must be hidden from Your presence, since I will not be able to stand before You to pray.” Avivah Zornberg in “The Murmuring Deep” states, “To flee, then, is the opposite of to stand.”

Jonah, hence, becomes the archetypal story of fleeing. The Vilna Gaon comments about Jonah: “Everyone flees from G-d’s presence and is reluctant to stand before Him.” Zornberg writes in her commentary of Genesis: “To stand in the presence of G-d” is to resist the temptations of flight, to bear the tensions of freedom and obedience, of a position where vertical and horizontal axes meet. No one, says the Gaon, chooses to be; it is normal to decompose, to evade the demands of a whole consciousness. Unlike the phenomena of nature, man cannot be shocked into being, by fear, by Necessity, by the fiat of God. His is a more complicated story. It is the story of the quest for *amidah* [for standing], for a solid reality on which to base his life.” So how fitting is it that we read the story of Jonah directly before standing for virtually the entire N’ilah service?

For it is impossible to overstate the centrality of amidah, of standing, within Judaism. The past month of the Days of Awe have centered around it. We stood for the many Amidahs, for the Torah processions, for the recitation of Kol Nidre, for the Al Het and for the closing of the gates in N'ilah. Our people's story culminates in our standing at Sinai and is echoed by the heart of our service: the Amidah. Our tradition is the quest that begins in Bereshit and that evolves throughout Torah: to resist the urge to flee – to stand in the presence of the Divine – and to answer the question, “Where are you?” On the heels of the Days of Awe, we must remember that teshuva not only means turning and repentance, it means “answer.”

Our community knows very well how difficult it is to not run away, to not hide and, instead, to stay put and to engage in dialogue. It is a most difficult of tasks to stand – to not prostrate ourselves nor fall to our knees in despair and guilt – yet it is precisely that for which we are created. As Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his letters to a young poet, “We are set into life, as it is the element to which we are most perfected.” What a sin it would be if the oceans thought themselves not capable of flowing, the sun thought itself not able to shine, or if the plants believed themselves not up to the task of growing; yet, many of us think ourselves incapable of the task of standing proud, staying put, being upright or of inspiring another out of their hiding place. We are the creations formed into an upright being on two legs with the reason and intellect to overcome the desire to run away and the language to converse with one another and with God.

While I'd love to end with a light limerick of my own, there is a much weightier issue on my mind: the overwhelming stories of queer and questioning youth committing suicide in the past weeks. 13-year-old Seth Walsh in California, eighth-grader Asher Brown, 15-year-old Billy Lucas and Rutgers' freshman Tyler Clementi are just some of the souls who thought they were better off dead than gay. And when that is the message that society is sending our young family members, it is time to change the message. While we have candidates, clergy and tv pundits claiming that their bigotry and one-liners were not intended to bring a child so low as to cause him to take his own life, we must stand and say as God said to Cain, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's bloods is crying out to me.” (Genesis 4:10) We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We have a duty to stand tall and to tell them that it does get better; that they and we are *b'tzelem Elohim* and there will come a day when they mustn't hide and that they can rise above the snakes that slither in the bushes. For it is Seth, Asher, Billy and Tyler who are now asking us, “Where are you?” We are the lesbians, the gays, the bisexuals, the transsexuals, the dykes, the fags and the queens, and we love every bit of it. We came out of the proverbial bushes of Rockford, of Ohio, of Wisconsin, of wherever we were hiding and were able to find a place to stand on. Now, I ask you to inspire those around you to do so as well. Show those who try to take on the more vulnerable members of our dear family that we have come from hiding but that we were created to stand.

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam asher yatzar et haadam b'chochmah.*

Blessed are You Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe who created the human being with Divine wisdom.

Shabbat Shalom.