

## Whole Days/Holy Days

Jamaica Plain, September 20, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

This week I was talking to a friend who is an older Jewish man, and he said, "May we be inscribed for a good year." The Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have finished, and Jewish families are gathering for Succoth. These are troubled times. We face the possibility of a war with Iraq, the country where the Babylonian Talmud was created. In the event of such a war, Iraqi rockets could inflict terrible damage on Israel. Israel continues to struggle with issues of security and justice concerning the Palestinians.

Our first reading today was from the Gospel of Matthew. This may seem like an odd choice for a service on the Jewish High Holy Days. However, I discovered that it was a text for the common lectionary readings for this Sunday. This passage in Matthew has been used against the Jewish community for centuries, with Christians being identified with the later group who are now first, and Jews with the first who are now last.

The passage actually refers to the Kingdom of God, with its topsy-turvy values, and that one should guard against spiritual pride. Such passages are aimed at good spiritual people, people who attend worship services, people like us. Recently, the Catholic Church and its theologians issued a statement that 'Judaism is not superceded by Christianity, that the Jewish faith is an equally valid way to God.' This is good news in a grim time. After all, the passage in Matthew does speak of all the laborers getting the same reward, whether first or last to begin the work.

Speaking of the first shall be last and the last first, I'd like to tell you a bit about two Jewish writers that I have been reading, one famous and honored, one largely unknown. Both immigrated to America from Eastern Europe, but continued to write in Yiddish.

Isaac B. Singer was a Nobel Prize winner. I have a tenuous connection with Singer: back in 1980, I was a student intern at a UU church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. That congregation did worship services at a local nursing home, and afterwards would gather in a neighborhood coffee shop. The coffee shop was supposed to be a haunt of Singer's, but I never saw the writer.

Singer's work often has elements of the fantastic, as in *Satan in Goray*, where ordinary Jews struggle with a false messiah; the magical, as in *The Magician of Lublin*, or the erotic, as in *Enemies: a Love Story*, where a Holocaust survivor has moved to New York, and after learning that his wife has perished, marries the Polish Catholic woman who saved him. He adds a relationship with an American Jewish woman, and then discovers his first wife is still alive. In *Yentl*, an 18th century Jewish woman disguises herself as a man so as to study Torah; she rejects a human love to grow closer to God. In *Shosha*, a man's love for a child-woman leads him not to flee the Holocaust in Poland. Years later he tells a friend in Israel, "I never beat up or killed anyone, so I can still call myself a Jew. "

Singer also wrote many stories for children. In *The Golem*, an orphan servant girl falls in love with a golem, or temporary monster created to save the Jewish community from persecution. After the name of God is removed from the monster's forehead, he returns to clay, and the despondent servant vanishes. The narrator comments, "perhaps love is stronger than the name of God."

I learned about Chaim Grade from a retired Rabbi – Sam Chiele, who suggested that some people consider Grade a better writer than Singer, certainly one who wrote more about ordinary Jewish people in Eastern Europe before World War Two. Grade, who died in New York in 1980, wrote about a world that vanished in the Holocaust. Bialystok in Poland, where my grandfather came from, had the largest Jewish community in world. Today in Bialystok there are no bialys, and no Jews.

Chaim writes of ordinary life and the factions in the Jewish community – pious worshipers who want nothing to do with Israel; religious Zionists, secular Zionists, Socialists, and Communists. In *The Rebbetzin* or "Rabbi's Wife," Perle, the daughter of a prominent rabbi, has her wedding engagement broken off by a rabbi who finds her controlling and manipulative. Perle marries another rabbi, and pushes her husband to high office and fame in retaliation. In *Laybe Lazar's Courtyard*, a rabbi suffers because he can't say no, he can't make himself forbid anything under Jewish law. As an impoverished rabbinic student living far from home, he had fasted and worshiped for a very minor Jewish holiday; while at worship he was told that his Mother had come a long distance to see him. Unwilling to disrupt worship, he stays on till the end of the service. His mother has gone, impressed by her son's devotion, but he never sees her again. In *The Oath*, the dying father of a fairly secular Jewish family makes his college student son promise to quit school and study Torah with an obscure and eccentric rabbi who runs a grocery store. The son only keeps the oath for a year, but it leads to healing for the widow and the rabbi, who marry. For *Grade*, the essentials are God's Torah, which teaches how to act and live in the day to day, love of people, and compassion.

Compassion, love, and God are three essential pillars of spiritual life. In the Jewish High Holy Day, Yom Kippur is the time for atonement, a time to restore "at-one-ment" between ourselves and God and our neighbors. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote, "We must become ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil." So the Jewish community gathers in silence on Yom Kippur, to ask forgiveness for all debts.

Let us gather in silence in our community. The Buddhist writer Thich Nhat Hanh paraphrased Descartes, "I think, therefore I am; I think too much, therefore I am not." Let us gather in the silence and reflect on our need to forgive and be forgiven, on our needs for compassion, love and God.

Silence

May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year!

