



Earlier this week, I am sure many of us were busy up until the last second making our final preparations for Pesach. Our own family was no exception; at about 5:30 pm on Monday afternoon, I found myself in the fruit department of the Ranier Valley Safeway store. A man in his late thirties looks me straight in the eye, and in a booming voice declares: "Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad!! This is how you say it, right?"

"Yes, I guess it is how we say it...who are you?... Are you... Jewish?"

Apparently, the Shema-reciter is a descendant of Spanish Jews; according to him, his great grandmother was Jewish, as was his grandmother, and apparently - his mother...

"Do you belong to one of the congregations in town?" I asked.

"Beth Shofar...In Tukwila.... We're a messianic congregation."

Now, I did not know if he was in fact Jewish, as he claimed.. I figured that the most I could (and should) do (!) was to explain that Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally different religions.

He politely smiled, but was not particularly receptive to my words. I could see that he believed that being Jewish was consistent with a commitment to JC.

I posed the following question: "If you believe that the Torah is binding, will you be eating Matzah tonight?"

"No, I will not"

"Why not?"

At this point, things become a bit of a blur; I didn't exactly understand what he said; something about *JC eating the matzah for us, being our Paschal Lamb...You get the idea.....*

As our mini-debate reached a crescendo, he assured me that I, along with the entire Jewish people, would ultimately “see the light” and embrace his belief in JC.

Incidentally, after the Hag, I checked and it seems that Beth Shofar had a Passover Seder. Not a lot of matzah or maror in this video, but a lot of bongos....Perhaps an echo of Miriam taking a drum in her hands after the sea split (!) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVHA3HfiHTo#t=10>

As my mentor and I we were about to declare a truce, a young woman with a bright cheery smile and pure wonderment in her eyes approached me and asked, "Are you Rabbi Meyers?"

I nodded. "How do you know who I am?"

"I saw your picture on the website."

To make a long story short, this woman had contacted me several weeks earlier inquiring about conversion. We had a brief exchange and agreed to be in touch following Pesach.

The scene was somewhat surreal: a man of Jewish lineage urging me to accept the Christian messiah and an inspired non-Jewish woman seeking to become part of the Seattle Jewish community. Both on Erev Pesach 5774.

On Seder night, prior to the main mitzvot of Matzah and Maror, we recite a Hallel. In the Sephardic Hagadah shel Pesach edited by Hazzan Azose, the Hallel is introduced by the words וְנֹאמֵר לְפָנָיו הַלְלוּיָהּ - "...and we will recite before him, Hallelu-yah". In other editions, וְנֹאמֵר לְפָנָיו שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה הַלְלוּיָהּ, " "...and we will recite before him a new song, Hallelu-yah". According to both versions, though, before the blessing of גֹּאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל - He who redeemed Israel - we say וְנֹדַדָּה לְךָ שִׁיר וְנֹדַדָּה לְךָ שִׁיר - *and we shall thank You with a new song for our redemption and for the deliverance of our souls.*

Now what is the *new song* we are referring to here in the Haggadah? It seems to be the same old Hallel: the verses from Tehilim, from Psalms, that we say every holiday, and customarily recite on Rosh Hodesh! According to the text that introduces the Hallel with the phrase שירה חדשה, we do hear an echo of the daily blessing following the Shema שירה חדשה שבחו גאולים לשמך הגדול על שפת הים – *the redeemed ones praised Your great name with a new song at the edge of the sea*.... And in keeping with the theme that in every generation – and especially on the seder night – each Jew must see himself as if he personally left Egypt, the שירה חדשה – the “new song” terminology strikes a familiar chord. The Hallel of the Seder becomes our “Song at the Sea”

But the term שיר חדש does not recall that blessing....Maybe the song is a “new song” because on the night of the Seder, the Hallel is split in half, one portion read before the main mitzvot of the evening, the other after Birkat Hamazon....?

I would like to suggest an alternate explanation of the concept of a “new song” on Pesach.

Back in 1965, Rabbi Norman Lamm delivered a sermon to his congregation, the Jewish Center in New York City. His words are as relevant today as they were then. Rabbi Lamm distinguishes between two concepts: novelty and renewal. Novelty, he explains, “is the misuse of the inclination for newness for things, for gadgets...” Renewal, in contrast, “comes about when we apply the desire for newness to man himself, to achieve new insights which result in the transformation of his soul and his spirit.” Whereas novelty is extrinsic, a question of packaging, Rabbi Lamm notes, “renewal is intrinsic; it is a matter of content. Novelty is the seeking of thrills; renewal is the thrill of seeking.”

We Jews seem to have an inner sense, a drive, towards renewal. Only, quite often we misdirect it. Take the Jewish world over the last two hundred years. With the advent of the Age of Reason and scientific inquiry, we Jews succeeded in unraveling three thousand years of Jewish tradition: Many of us bought into an approach, championed most notably by Wellhausen, that exchanged the awesome Sinaitic revelation recorded in the Torah for the four-editor theory. Modern Bible critics declared that the Torah does not record an immutable, Divinely-given Torah, but rather four different editors – the J, E, D and P editors, were responsible for the work’s final content and form. Many Jews subsequently traded in תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב – *Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the House of Jacob* - for a convoluted hodge-podge

pastiche of sometimes redundant and contradictory passages. Instead of the profound depth and harmonizing approach of our trusted oral tradition - through our beloved Rishonim and Acharonim - we uncritically ingested the legal and moral anarchy of sundry academics for whom our tradition was never a Living Torah.....

To be sure, the numerous challenges raised by academic approaches to the Bible are serious and each deserves a thoughtful response. Great Torah luminaries such as R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samson_Raphael_Hirsch provided such responses. In our modern day, Rav Mordechai Breuer developed an innovative response to the Bible critics, although some Torah personalities, like R. Shlomo Aviner, have issues with his assumptions and methodology <http://www.ravaviner.com/2012/09/what-would-rabbi-mordechai-breuer-have.html> In an unconventional use of modern media to illustrate the depth of the Torah to a new generation, Rabbi David Fohrman has launched <http://alephbeta.org/> These are all examples of renewal; they are models of what can transpire “when we apply the desire for newness to man himself, to achieve new insights which result in the transformation of his soul and his spirit.”

The theme of renewal permeates our classical sources. Rabbi Lamm cites the prophet Yehezkel, (Ezekiel) who “properly pleads for *lev hadash ve-ruah hadashah* (Ez. 36:26), ‘a new heart and a new spirit,’ not merely for new techniques and new objects. The halakhah declares that *ger she-nitgayyer ke-katan she-nolad dami*, ‘a proselyte has the status of a newborn child’ (Yevamot 22a). And, in the same spirit, Maimonides declares that the repentant person must experience the feeling of spiritual rebirth; religiously he is a new individual (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Teshuvah 7:7).”

The “new song” of the *Leil HaSeder* is really the text of the “same old Hallel” that we have come to know and love. On the Seder night, and for that matter, throughout Pesach, each Jew is being challenged to discover new purpose in his or her life as a Jew; on the eve of the Exodus, “Why be Jewish?” warrants new consideration. Our task is to make the same old song **שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ**.

Congregation Ezra Bessaroth is in a unique position. Founded by Sephardic Jews from the island of Rhodes, EB provides the structure, the rootedness, the tradition.

In recent years, EB has welcomed in Jews from various backgrounds: Ashkenazic Jews, Ba'alei Teshuva/recently religious Jews, and Gerim, converts. The call of the day? Cross-fertilization! What does this practically mean? That newcomers should respect the Rhodesli synagogue customs, including the text of the Tefilot and the proper pronunciation of those Tefilot, to name just a couple of examples. On the flip-side, long-standing members should both admire and revel in the pure inspiration and idealism of our new additions. Together, this Pesach, we can generate a Hallel that is truly a שיר חדש, a new song.

While some seek novelty, we must pursue renewal.