

Rosh Hashanah 2009
Joanne Greenberg

Happy New Year! We have three of them: Pesach, Simchat Torah and today.

Recently, Rabbi Jamie did us the favor of inviting a group from the Messianic believers who pray above us on Floyd Hill. They wore tzitzit, kippot, they keep Shabbat, and are more conversant with the earl sages than I will ever be. They reminded us to honor the Tanach - which they call the Old Testament – and some of them have committed it to memory. Their presentation made me more aware of what I mean when I say I am a Jew. These fellows in tzitzit were utterly and completely Christian. There are basic differences besides belief in Jesus as messiah and a complete acceptance of the New Testament. What else separated me from them as I sat, respecting their commitment and seriousness?

For one thing, two thousand years of extra history. They missed the Diaspora and its paradoxes. They are utterly literal: seven days of creation, dinosaurs here and gone in forty-five minutes, no Einstein, no Darwin, no Chelm, no dibbuk, no Golem, no Tevye, n Mel Brooks, no Jerry Seinfeld, no Hebrew, no Yiddish, above all o God-wrangle. That God-wrangle is at the center of the Jewish experience, I think, from Abraham and Moses bargaining to Tevye's 'would it hurt you?'

Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees because God told him, Lech Le'cha – literally, go to yourself. There were no Chaldeans in Ur when Avram was there. There wouldn't be Chaldeans in Ur for 200 years. Isaac looked at Rebecca – the usual translation says he alighted from his camel. My Hebrew says he fell off. I love the picture – the young man, traumatized into shyness by his past experience, sees the beautiful woman who will be his – his mixing, fixing, fiddling wife – one look and he's off the camel, all arms and legs. My father saw the woman who was to be his wife sitting with her friends at a picnic. He was sitting with his buddies at their picnic. Of course he beaned his friend Abner with a Kaiser roll to get her attention. Unfortunately, this led to a full-sized food-fight. My father had a problem. Isaac had a problem, too. There were no camels in Hebron or Beensheba at that time. The camel wouldn't be introduced into the region until much later. The Hebrews wandered in the desert for forty years – no food but mannah, nowater but from the rock and an oasis or two, all 600,000 of them, but they just happened to cross and recross the businest trade routes of Iron Age history.

Modern archaeology has caught us napping. So what do we do with these shreds of our tradition? Rabbi Jamie said that he was going to talk about food. So, what do we do with this cole slaw? Our history? Maybe; our truth, surely.

Because we know who we are, walking arund with a respectably ancient DNA that tells us that before the camels or the Chaldeans were there, we were there, a tiny bunch of noise-makers wrestling their way out of polytheisms and child sacrifice into a unique and unrivalled monotheisms, a monotheisms so stringent that even the Holocaust couldn't break it, a shining moment and we walk right past it. This bunch of kvechers were the inventors of Shabbat and of man-woman closeness instead of the spear-buddy traditions of all the other ancient, near eastern lands, of the marriage of ethics to religion of a portable faith centered in a book that gives a warts-and-all picture of the tantrum genius we are. God help us. Hallelujah.