

PARSHAT VAERA
JANUARY 9, 2016
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Where are you from? I get asked this question many times. I presume it is because: one, I don't have the perfect Chicago accent and, two, it is rather unusual for a pulpit Rabbi to work in the community in which he was born and raised. In each case when I am asked the question I tell the people of my birth in Toronto, my schooling in New York City, and now my time here in Chicago.

"Where are you from?" is really a question that should concern all of us. It is not merely a geographical issue; it is also an ancestral issue. Knowing about your personal background allows you to understand more about yourself and the possibilities for your future. As one unknown writer wrote: "You can't know where you are going until you know where you have been." This is very true in Jewish life. We are in the midst of reading about the plagues and, next week, will read about the Exodus from Egypt. It is the story we read at the Passover Seder. Because of our past our enslavement in Egypt and our liberation from bondage we have a responsibility to work on behalf of the freedom for all. Thirty-six times in the Torah we are reminded that we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Therefore, we have an ongoing obligation to take care of the strangers in our midst. On a personal family level, four times a year we recite the Yizkor memorial prayers reminding us of our personal ancestry and our responsibility to remember those who have passed away as we assimilate their values and cherish their legacies.

Where Moses' birth was chronicled in last week's Torah portion, the text omitted any description of his lineage, simply informing us that "And a certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman." In this week's Torah portion that omission is addressed. G-d commands Moses to return to Pharaoh and again demand the release of the Israelite slaves. The Torah then abruptly digresses to present the genealogical table listing the descendents of Jacob's older sons, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi. The listing includes the detailed description of the lineage of Moses' and Aaron's family within the tribe of Levi. Upon completion of the genealogical record, the Torah returns to the narrative of the Exodus.

This interruption of the narrative raises a question. Why wasn't Moses' lineage mentioned earlier and why is it mentioned at this point? Rabbi Shmuel Goldin suggests that "the glaring omission of Moses' ancestry in Parshat Shmot serves to remind us that the most important aspects of our lives are self-determined. While G-d decides to whom we are born, when and where we are born, our genetic make-up, etc., we determine through our own free will, who we will become." Therefore, Moses' parentage does not necessarily determine the quality of his life.

On the other hand, he continues, "while pedigree is neither the sole nor the most important determinant of a person's character, an individual's family background certainly contributes to the formation of that character. Our ancestry creates the backdrop against which we weave the tapestry of our lives." Therefore, Moses's story would have been incomplete if we did not know his ancestry, where he had come from and the values that his forebearers transferred to him.

Knowing where you come from is a central focus of knowing who you are and what is your task in life. In the last few years, two American political figures found out that they had Jewish parentage which was unknown to them throughout most of their lifetime. Hamilton Jordan was President Jimmy Carter's advisor and Chief of Staff. While Jordan died in 2008, we know much of the story of his life through a recent book which was edited by his daughter from a manuscript he had written.

Though Jordan was a good ol' Southern boy, at the cemetery service for his maternal grandmother, Helen, he was puzzled to discover her plot was nestled alongside that of a Jewish family. At 20 years of age, he did a bit of digging revealing that his beloved grandmother was Jewish. She had married his Baptist grandfather in the years immediately preceding the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, in a South that viewed Jews as unacceptably different. His own mother would never speak of her Jewish roots.

When Jordan asked his mother about his ancestry, he was told that she would never talk about it. In the latter part of his life his children suggested that he speak to his Uncle to find out what had happened. After he did so, according to his daughter Kathleen, he spent the rest of his life trying to connect with the Jewish community. He was baptized Baptist, the family grew up Episcopalian, but culturally he was drawn to his Jewish roots. Kathleen reports that, "it had an impact on his relationship to the civil rights movement, I think it made it personal for him."

The other person was the former Secretary of State in the Clinton administration, Madeleine Albright, who discovered at age 59, through the reporting of a Washington Post journalist, that she was born to Jewish parents. Though an Episcopalian who was raised as a Catholic, she found out that more than a dozen of her family members died in the Holocaust, including three grandparents in concentration camps. Her father, a former Czech diplomat, and her mother, never told her the family secret.

In her book *Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937-1948*, she writes of her digging through a trove of untouched documents that her parents left behind, visiting her childhood neighborhoods in the Czech Republic, and tracing the steps of her family, which moved from London and back before relocating to Denver.

When asked who she really was, she stated: "I am very proud of my Czechoslovak background, but my identity the way I describe it now is: I am an American, I am a mother, I am a grandmother, I am a Democrat, I came from Jewish heritage, I was a Roman Catholic, I am a practicing Episcopalian, I am somebody who is devoted to human rights, I am someone who believes in an international community and I can't separate those things ... I can trace these various parts as having a profound influence on me in one form or another."

Albright's daughter married into a Jewish family and her youngest grandson had a Bar Mitzvah. She said that "as he was preparing for it, the family was talking about the various Jewish traditions, the appreciation for history, for family, for humanity, for education." Somehow, she believes the person she is was affected by her Jewish ancestry.

There are many other stories as well. One of them I quoted on Rosh Hashanah. The story of Csanad Szegedi, who was a rising star in the anti-Semitic Jobbik, the Hungarian ultra-nationalist political party, until he found out that he had Jewish background. He was the anti-Semite who discovered he was Jew which totally changed his entire life as he began to search his ancestry and his real story.

For most of us, the stories are not as dramatic. We know about our past. The search for our ancestors and our heritage, genealogical research, has become commonplace in our day and age. For Jews, this is always part of our lives, our personal history, and our communal history, as well. But, it is not enough to stop there. We must take the past and use it for the present and the future.

Almost two years ago, I was present in Israel for an international educational summit. We went around the table introducing ourselves and were asked to reply to the following question: Where is home? I had to think for a moment and I said then, and would reiterate now, that I actually have three homes. The first is the place of my birth and the place where my roots continue to be: the city of Toronto. Born in Toronto of parents who were born in Toronto and grandparents and great grandparents, on my father's side, buried in that city. Toronto is more than just a birthplace, it is where I attended elementary school, high school, and college. That upbringing had a great effect upon the person I am today.

The second home I have is here in Chicago. After graduating from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1976, I have made my professional home here, first in Hyde Park, and now for the past 28 years in Highland Park. I have lived in Chicago almost twice as many years as I have in Toronto. It has been home for me and Bryna, the place where our children were born, and a city where I have been privileged to serve the Jewish and general community.

I also have a third home. Because I live in a parsonage, my current house belonging to the Synagogue, the only piece of property that I own is in Jerusalem, where Bryna and I have an apartment. I also consider this home as well and a place I eventually hope to spend more time.

Thus, when they ask where I come from and where am I going, all these places play a role in my life. Even more so, the people in each of these places have an effect on my life. I think it is crucial that we understand our past, that we evaluate our present, and that we plan for the future. In the beginning of the third chapter of Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, we are told by Akaviah ben Mahalal'el: "Ponder three things and you avoid falling into sin: know your origin, your destination, and for whom you require to give an accounting." In other words, know where you have been, where you are going, and your purpose in life.

Moses had a very complicated upbringing. Sent off by his mother at three months of age, he was raised by an Egyptian princess in Pharaoh's court. It was only later that he learned of his origin and his complicated ancestry. Once he did, his life was changed. While his ancestry was important, and therefore placed in our Torah reading of this morning, he had to make his journey on his own and decide on his destination.

So it is with us. We should acknowledge from whence we come and appreciate it. We should also remember, as James Baldwin wrote, “If you know from whence you come, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go.” This is our continuing challenge. To know the past, to work in the present, and to have an effect on the future.

Where are you from? Where are you today? And, where are you going? I hope we can answer all those questions appropriately and make a difference in our world today and tomorrow.