The Kashani Rug – Parashat Miketz

Professor Ze'ev Maghen tells the following story about his paternal grandfather, an Iranian Jew who lived in a small town called Kashan, about 150 miles south of Tehran. Once, in the time of Maghen's grandfather's grandfather, over a hundred years ago, a Jewish Kashani merchant accidentally overcharged a local Muslim clergyman. This simple mistake ignited terrible backlash reaching all the way to the court of the regional governor. In no time, an official edict had been passed requiring the conversion of every Jewish man, woman, and child upon pain of death.

With the appointed deadline for conversion quickly approaching, the elders of the Jewish community of Kashan held a solemn meeting at the house of the chief rabbi. Offering supplications and intoning psalms, they prayed for a solution until finally, just as the assembly was about to disband, the rabbi's wife stepped forward. "Leave it to me and my sisters," she promised confidently. "Come back the day before your meeting with the governor and I'll tell you what to do."

A few days later, the venerable delegation of Kashani Jews approached their Excellency. "You have wasted your time in traveling here," the governor began. "There is nothing that you can say that will make me change my mind. By next Friday's prayers, you will all be good Muslims. Nevertheless, you have come this far – what have you to say?"

The elders quickly unfurled two carpets, the handiwork of the rabbi's wife and her sisters. "On behalf of the Jewish community of Kashan province, we place these humble offerings before His Excellency and request that he choose one of them as our tribute," said the Jewish spokesman. Both carpets were exquisite – plush and tightly woven, made out of the most expensive and luxurious of materials. The

first was covered with ornate and colorful designs – gold, green, and turquoise, whirling waves of color and splendid silhouettes of every shape and size. The second carpet was a stunning, rich shade of solid red.

"How dare you?" cried the governor. "Do you take me for a fool? What kind of choice is this? No one in his right mind would select the second carpet, bearing just one hue, over the first!"

Amidst this torrent of anger, the head of the Jewish delegation gingerly stepped forward. "These rugs, Your Excellency," he began, "Represent the territories under your benevolent rule. Today Kashan province is filled with peoples of every possible culture and creed – Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and more – and in this way it resembles the first carpet. Is it really your choice to exchange this rug for the second?" Immediately the governor realized the error of his ways. The Jews of Kashan were saved and went on to freely practice their religion for decades to come.

There are many lessons that this powerful story has to teach us – about the blessings of diversity and multi-culturalism, about the responsibility of those in positions of authority to cultivate and protect difference, about embracing hope and possibility even in dark times and, of course, about the great wisdom of Jewish women! But thinking about this story today - in the month of December, on the Shabbat of *Parashat Miketz,* during the Festival of Chanukah – I am particularly struck by what this parable has to offer us specifically as American Jews. Professor Maghen uses this family tale not to decry anti-Semitism or intolerance but rather as a call for Jews, ourselves, to embrace the differences that make us unique – to allow our multi-colors to shine through rather than robing ourselves in a generic shade of USA red. One of the things that I have always loved about liberal Judaism is that it allows us to live fully in both the Jewish and the secular world at the same time; it doesn't force us to

choose between either embracing our particular tradition or participating robustly in mainstream culture. I don't think it's any coincidence that I fell in love with Judaism largely through the example of a Grateful-Dead obsessed, softball-playing rabbinical student who wore both an earring and a *tallit katan* every day. The idea that a person can be both deeply religious and yet totally of this world had great resonance for my teenage self. This idea continues to hold meaning for me still today as well.

Indeed, there is much blessing to be found living in both the Jewish and the broader world. Not only are we able to experience the best of what both Judaism and secular life have to offer but we also have the privilege of being the swirls of color on our world's carpet or, in the language of Judaism, acting as *or l'goyim* (a light unto the nations) and sharing the wisdom and beauty of Jewish tradition with the greater community. Cloistered religious sects who live apart may avoid some of the "corrupting influences" of the outside world but they also lose the ability to bring their tradition into dialogue with others, to watch their rituals and values serve as an example as has the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), or to see those rituals and values shaped by contemporary norms as with the *chavurah* movement and the birth of egalitarianism in Judaism, both of which emerged from the socially progressive era of 1970's America.

Despite all these blessings, however, living squarely in two worlds is not without its challenges and for many of us December is the month which causes us most to question the balance we have brokered between our Jewish and broader identities. From parents I hear how hard it is when their children pine for Christmas – the gifts, of course, but something less tangible as well – the energy, the excitement, the sense of being part of a greater whole to which many of their friends and neighbors belong. Adults, too, are not immune from feeling a bit at sea during this time of year. Are lightings of the *chanukiyah* on public property a way of sharing our holiday with the non-Jewish community or do they somehow

violate notions of separation of church and state that many of us hold dear? Do we "do up" Chanukah, for ourselves and for our families, or is this perhaps falling prey to the materialism of the season and trying to equate the most central of Christian holidays with what is essentially only a minor festival on our calendar? A friend recently shared with me that growing up in Montreal in the 1950's she always felt somehow embarrassed when someone wished her "Merry Christmas," whereas her son growing up in the 1990's would unabashedly proclaim "Thanks, but I celebrate Chanukah." Do we correct innocent well-wishers or simply accept the gracious spirit of their greeting? The answer to this particular question is probably unimportant but the greater dilemma is absolutely essential: How do we best go about being Jewish in the non-Jewish world in which we live?

Perhaps it is no coincidence that during the cold weeks of December with their twinkling lights and pine-scented splendor, we encounter in our Torah the magnificent story of Joseph. Living most of his adult life away from family and co-religionists -- in Potiphar's house, in prison, in Egyptian high society – Joseph is the quintessential "Diaspora Jew," marrying an Egyptian wife, working at a secular job, adopting the name, dress, and customs of his new land. Despite all this, however, Joseph remains loyal to God, crediting the Divine for his many successes, and loyal to his people, forgiving the brothers who once betrayed him and ultimately bringing the entire family to settle together in the land of Goshen. The commentators imagine that Joseph raised his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, with a strong sense of identity and even explain that it is for this reason that we bless our children on Friday night by their names, reciting "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh" rather than invoking the patriarchs as one might otherwise expect. Joseph's two children were forced to maintain their Israelite heritage amidst a foreign land and culture and we pray that our own children will be able to do the same. Or in the words of the Lithuanian Rabbi Ha'amek Davar: "'Fear not to go down to Egypt,' God tells Jacob - do

not fear that your descendents will be absorbed into the Egyptian way of life. I will be with them in Egypt and keep them distinctive."

To be absorbed yet remain distinctive; to live fully in the broader world yet maintain a strong sense of Jewish identity and pride. I don't believe that there is any one formula as to how to strike this balance, nor – unfortunately – do the choices that we make at one moment in time tend to feel right forever, instead requiring constant recalibration as our world and life circumstances change. There are times that the Christmas season feels to me a stunning example of how we, as American Jews, really *can* live in two worlds – appreciating the beauty and joy of another's tradition while continuing to proudly and enthusiastically practice our own. There are also times that this period on the calendar feels a bit jarring to me, as if I'm suddenly reminded just how very much in the minority we are here in American even if daily life experience tends not to make us feel all that very different. Living in a world of color rather than one of solid red provides so much richness and blessing. It also presents us with the challenge of striving to create a meaningful balance between the multiple facets of our identity.

And so we return to *Parashat Miketz* and to the story of Joseph, a great man who reminds us that it is not only possible to dwell in two worlds but that it can be incredibly life enhancing to do so. By rising to a position of great prominence in Egyptian society, Joseph not only was able to provide for his wife and children an experience far different from what they would have encountered in Canaan but he was also able to ultimately save his brothers and father from famine not to mention avert catastrophe for the entire Egyptian people. He was able to remain loyal to his tradition and to his God, passing on these values to two sons who would be used as examples of Jewish fidelity for centuries to come. As we sit here today on this Shabbat of Chanukah, exactly three weeks before Christmas, may the words of our

Torah portion inspire us to examine anew the sacred question: How do we best go about being Jewish in the non-Jewish world in which we live? I look forward to exploring our answers together.

"*Eyn navon v'chacham camocha* – There is none as discerning and wise as you," says Pharaoh when he places Joseph in command over all Egypt (Genesis 41:39). May we too, display the thoughtfulness of our patriarch as we balance the many diverse, vital, elements of our overlapping identities.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov!

Rabbi Annie Tucker