

‘Funny, you don’t *look* Jewish!’ Expanding Paradigms: Jews as Family Rather than Race

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Lance Armstrong was not the first to seize on bracelets to promote a cause. Though his yellow rubber bracelets have been replicated in many different colors and bear countless political, social, and health related messages, I recall wearing a slogan bracelet when I was in high school, long before Lance toured France. However the inscription on my bracelet was etched into a metal disc, and attached to my wrist with black twine. The message was not about living strong or standing strong, it was the Amharic name of an Ethiopian Jew who had been airlifted out of a bloody civil war zone by Israeli commandos. The year was 1991, and then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir authorized El Al aircraft to fly on Shabbat—which is not the practice for Israel’s national airline—in this case to rescue over 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from certain death. It was this very weekend, 18 years ago, that 34 El Al jumbo jets and Hercules C-130’s carried out what became known as Operation Solomon. Men, women, and children who had never even seen an airplane much less traveled on one boarded continuously throughout the day and night to be transported to the land of Israel...a land where they would be safe from war and persecution, a land that seemed extremely far away in their imaginations, even though it wasn’t particularly far by air; but a land that many of these Ethiopians had heard of. You see, this community has considered itself Jewish for centuries, observing Shabbat, a biblical form of kashrut, reading from Torah scrolls, and maintaining aspects of ritual purity. This community has long been known to the Jewish world. In the 16th Century, the Chief Rabbi of Cairo, Rabbi David ben Shlomo ibn Zimra (known as the Radbaz) declared unequivocally that this community was authentically Jewish, and not in need of conversion-- which was the basis of the modern State of Israel not requiring any conversion whatsoever for Ethiopian immigrants. The Radbaz believed that Ethiopian Jews were descendants of the tribe of Dan, which the Bible suggests three thousand years ago refused to get involved in a dispute between King Solomon’s two warring sons, gave up their land inheritance and resettled in the region of Cush, below Egypt. Indeed when the prophet Isaiah prophesies the ultimate return of exiles to the land of Israel, Cush

is one of the places he specifically mentions as a center of Jewish diaspora existence. I remember as a teenager that we were told not to call these Jews *Falashas*, even though that was how they were commonly referred to. Falasha in Amharic means ‘alien one,’ or ‘stranger’...and that’s how other Ethiopians disparagingly referred to them, because of their unique practices and observances. Instead, they preferred the designation Beita Yisrael, the house of Israel. Indeed, these people are among our brothers and sisters in the house of Israel.

I thought about this story this week when I read of another historical milestone that is about to happen right here in the American Jewish community. And, I must tell you, this particular piece of history will be made by a fellow Clevelander. Her name is Alysa Stanton, and she is about to be ordained the first African American female rabbi in the United States. She was born 45 years ago to a Pentecostal family in Cleveland, OH, and when she was 11 she moved to Ft. Collins, CO. At the age of nine she started asking her unsuspecting parents questions about Kabbalah, and when she turned ten, a devout Christian uncle presented her with a book of Hebrew grammar. Years later, she would travel 60 miles to Denver to study with a Conservative rabbi with whom she eventually converted. She is about to move to Greenville, NC where she will become the rabbi of Congregation Bayit Shalom, which, incidentally, reports having no non-white members. Nevertheless, this trained psychotherapist says that she did not convert for marriage or for any other reason than Judaism was the fulfillment of her spiritual yearnings. How precious that her ordination will come on the heels of the festival of Shavuot, when we recall the Bible’s most famous Jew-by-choice, a Moabite named Ruth.

The statistics tell us that 20% of American Jews, some 0.5 million people, are of ethnic or racially diverse backgrounds...Asian, Latino, black, or mixed...from birth, conversion, or adoption. They join an already diverse global Jewish community that includes, among others, the Beyta Yisrael of Ethiopia. Meanwhile, Jews from SW India called Cochin, claim to have emigrated following the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE. While Jews in the north eastern provinces of India, the B’nai Menashe, claim to be the resettled—you guessed it—tribe of Menashe, following the Assyrian exile of the 8th century BCE. 1,700 B’nai Menashe live in Israel today. 2,100 years ago, a shipwreck allegedly stranded 7 Jewish families fleeing from Roman persecution in the Galilee just south of Mumbai. These Jews, called Bene Yisrael, were oil pressers in the Galilee and were referred to by their non-Jewish Indian neighbors as the

Saturday Oil Pressers, because they abstained from work on Shabbat. These are but a few examples of Jewish diversity in the world today. Reflecting on the American Jewish community, Brandeis University Professor Jonathan Sarna reminds us that 50 years ago the Jewish community seemed pretty monolithic. People would talk about someone who “looks Jewish.” He writes: “While Jews remain united by a bond of peoplehood as well as a religion, that bond is not characterized in racial terms.”

One of the most beautiful and penetrating commentaries by the prodigious sage Rashi comes at the very beginning of his commentary to the book of Numbers. On the very first verse, Rashi answers what is perhaps the most obvious, yet unasked questions of this parasha. Why does God need a census? Note that it is not Moses or Aaron who request this demographic data, rather it is God who commands them to count the people. *Vayidaber Adonai el Moshe be'midbar Sinai...laymor: se'u et kol rosh adat b'nai Yisrael...* God said to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai: Take a census of the whole Israelite community...Presumably though God does not need this information! The omniscient Creator of the Universe undoubtedly knows exactly how many Israelites there are! Then comes Rashi's magnificent explanation:

Mitoch chibatan l'fanav moneh otam kol sha'ah.

“It is on account of God's deep love for the people that He continually counts them.”

I'm sure most of us can relate to this phenomenon. We constantly count what is most valuable to us: from the dollars in our stock portfolios to the *tchatchkes* we collect, to our children and grandchildren. Counting, and numbering, and checking in with are all the things we do to this day with our precious belongings. We create guest lists for weddings and bar mitzvahs to enumerate those closest to us, and then we run to the mailbox each day to count their response cards. And Rashi teaches that the Jewish people are so precious to God that He counts each one of them with special care and attention. Moreover, consider how the parasha describes the organization of the tribes of Israel in relation to the tabernacle. You might have thought that the tabernacle should be placed at the head of the Israelite camp, given its outstanding holiness. Yet, the Torah tells us that it is placed right in the middle of tribes, each one of them having a place of access and closeness to the tabernacle. From where anyone stood, he or she could look toward the center of the camp and see the ark and then look to the right and to the left and see the broad

array of the Jewish family surrounding that space. From our vantage point in the Jewish world today, as we scan the complexion and complexity of the Jewish people, we realize that there are far more than just Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. I always tell non-Jewish visitors and students that **Judaism is not a race!** That was one of Hitler's idiotic constructs for dividing people, making enemies of most, and idealizing a supposedly pure Aryan race. But it bears no resemblance to reality, because there are Jews of all races! Jews have and do live on all the continents of the world, speak countless languages, have a palate of skin colors, eye shapes, and physical features. I much prefer to call Jews a family than a race. Just as a family grows from the inside as well as through those adopted by it from the outside, so too the Jewish people! Yet, even Jews have been challenged to love our own. The Torah says that the rebellions that are scattered throughout the Book of Numbers were instigated by the *erev rav*, the non-Israelite converts who came out of Egypt along with the Israelite nation. To this day, Ethiopian Jews struggle for equality in Israel, even as they don the IDF uniform and fight and die for the country. And though there really is no 'Jewish look' these days, some people struggle to see a Jewish face in features unlike their own. But the great Rav Kook, whose writings some of you have been studying lately, wrote a century ago:

Ahavat Yisrael hi ha'gedola she'bamitzvot ha'musariyot ve'chovot ha'Torah:

Loving our fellow Jews is the greatest of the mitzvot that have been transmitted and commanded by the Torah.

How precious is that love that knows no boundaries of race, ethnicity, or nationality...it is a love for all those who share but one and only one common characteristic: sharing in the destiny of the Jewish people. Mazal tov Rabbi Stanton; May you love the depth and diversity of the Jewish people...and may the Jewish people love you for your Torah, your teaching, and your dedicated leadership.

Shabbat Shalom.