

40th Anniversary Shabbat

Drash by Rabbi Leslie Bergson
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Parshah Tetzaveh/Shabbat Zachor

“Hidden Light”

And God said: “Let there be light”. This first light God made before the sun and the stars. God showed it to David, who burst into song. This was the light Moses saw on Sinai! At the creation, the universe from end to end radiated light, but it was withdrawn. And now it is stored away for the righteous, until all the worlds will be in harmony again and all will be united and whole. But until this future world is established, this light, coming out of darkness and formed by the Most Secret, is hidden: “Light is sown for the righteous “.

This meditation, adapted from the Zohar, appeared in an early edition of the Sha’ar Zahav siddur—the red one—a d has always been one of my favorite readings. It refers to the conundrum posed in the creation narrative. If God created light and darkness on the first day, and did not create the heavenly bodies until the fourth day, what has become of that first day’s light? It is hidden away, to be revealed only in Olam ha-ba, the World to Come.

This week’s Torah portion and its place in the Jewish year have a lot to say about the hidden and the revealed. Parshah Tetzaveh is usually the portion read on the Shabbat preceding Purim. The Torah portion begins with the instructions for the lighting of the Ner Tamid for the sanctuary, and goes on to describe in great detail the vestments of the priests, and the instructions for their consecration. In an essay in The Torah: A Women’s’ Commentary, Professor Lisa Grant points out the correlation between this week’s Torah portion, the only one from Exodus to Deuteronomy in which the name of Moses does not appear, and the book of Esther, in which the name of God does not appear. Professor Grant asks, what does this parallel “absence of presence” signify? Several reasons are offered by the commentators for the absence of the name of Moses in this parshah; the most compelling of which is that Moses, in his humility, has stepped aside to allow his brother Aaron to have the spotlight, for at least one parshah. The absence of God’s name in Megillat Esther, which is sometimes interpreted to show what human beings can accomplish on their own, may also be interpreted as God’s handiwork hiding behind the human actions of Mordechai and Esther. Esther’s name, Professor Grant points out, is based on the Hebrew root samech-tav-resh, “to hide”.

She also notes that the wordplay can be carried further, as the word; “megillah” is based on the root gimel-lamed-hay; “to reveal”. Therefore the term “Megillat Esther” can be read figuratively as “revealing the hidden”.

Jewish history has often required us to hide who we are in order to save our lives. From the days of Hadrian, who forbade the teaching of Torah, and thus pushed it underground, to the forced conversions of medieval Europe, to child survivors of the Holocaust raised as Catholics to save their lives, Jews have had to make choices of what to reveal about themselves, what must be done in hiding, and who may be trusted with the knowledge of our true selves.

And there isn't much you need to tell gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people about hiding and revealing. We have been forced to hide, even from those closest to us; from our own families and friends, from those we loved but were afraid to show it.

Each one of us, regardless of religion or sexual or gender orientation, makes choices every day about what we hide and what we reveal about ourselves, but in order to live a life of integrity, there must be some places where we can be all of who we are. And that's a unique feature of Sha'ar Zahav.

In the early 1980s, Sha'ar Zahav was asked to present a panel discussion at a UAHC Biennial Conference. With some trepidation, Reform Jews from all over California trickled into our workshop to hear what we had to say. The panel was a great success, and was the beginning of our relationship with the larger Reform Jewish community, but to my mind, the most important statement came not from those of us on the panel, but from a member of the audience who had attended our services. She said that as a single heterosexual woman in her thirties, every time she went into a synagogue, she would always be asked if she was dating anyone and if not, whether she wanted to meet their nephew. The only exception, she said, was Sha'ar Zahav. “No one there ever asks me if I'm straight or gay, single or partnered. They're just happy to see me and accept me for who I am.”

Tonight is Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of remembrance, and the special haftarah portion for this Shabbat before Purim is the story of King Saul's encounter with Amalek. King Saul disregards God's command to kill Amalek's king Agag (In the book of Esther, Haman is described as an Agagite; hence the relationship between this haftarah and the coming holiday) and loses his kingship over it. We are commanded to blot out the name of Amalek from the earth; that is, in effect, we are to remember to forget. That's a good thing, because there is great peril in forgetting to remember.

In the early days of Sha'ar Zahav, many of our members could not identify themselves publicly by their full names because to do so might risk their jobs, custody of their children, or the love and support of their family members. The local and national Jewish community met us with suspicion and trepidation. “Why do you need your own congregation? Why can't you just join ours?” “Can we wish each other Shabbat shalom after services with a kiss?” We asked, “Can we come to your annual dinner

dance and dance with each other?” Their shocked looks were all the answer we needed. The UAHC (now URJ) proudly brought out a new Torah commentary which had a section on Leviticus 18 that was biased, ignorant and cruel in its depiction of homosexuality. Our members went right to the leadership of the UAHC and got it changed—to the wording we submitted—in the next edition. And then came AIDS. Our congregation, along with the rest of the community, watched with horror as healthy young men all around us withered and died, in seemingly no time at all. Mark Feldman, as sick as he was, began the “Phooey on AIDS” Fund, and, when gay men were prohibited from donating blood, the women of Sha’ar Zahav organized a blood drive. Mark saw to it that every one of us who donated blood received a rose from him. We all attended what seemed to be an endless parade of funerals. As awful as those times were, I cannot imagine what it would have been like without the support we gave to and received from one another. And then things got better. Safer sex practices slowed the transmission rate. HIV tests allowed people to know where they stood. AZT and other drugs became more effective as treatment. And then alternative insemination became available and adoption practices opened up, and lesbian women and gay men who had always wanted children had the chance to become parents, and Sha’ar Zahav became a place that welcomed and celebrated children. And then, there was the opportunity for us to legally marry. And then, people who had been forced to hide their true gender now were able to reveal it. And a new and more central location brought people from all sexual and gender orientations to Sha’ar Zahav, and it has become much more than “the gay synagogue”. And, now, after forty years in the wilderness, we find ourselves in this time at this place.

On the first day of creation, God made a light which is now hidden from us, but will be revealed in time to come. From the theophany of Moses right into the present day, God has made it clear to us that there is nothing clear about God. “Who are you?” Moses asks God, “Who shall I say sent me?” “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*”, God replies, “Tell them ‘I am’ sent you”. The second Commandment tells us that no image may be made of whatever we think God may look like. Moses Maimonides admonishes that anyone who thinks God has physical attributes is not only committing heresy, but suffering from a lack of imagination. We worship a God whose presence is in absence, not just in the book of Esther, but in our daily lives. The presence of absence is something that I feel for this congregation. Many of us who were once a part of Sha’ar Zahav have moved on to other places and are now involved in other pursuits, but what we experienced and what we learned here remains with us, a hidden light that we carry with us wherever we go. May that light continue to shine, a Ner Tamid for all time.