

Beaming

Parshat Ki Tissa: [Exodus 30:11 - 34:35](#)

Haftarah: [Ezekiel 36:16 - 36:38](#)

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Parashat *Ki Tissa* describes Moshe Rabbeinu in literally radiant terms:

Verse 35: “*And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face sent forth beams (karnei); and Moses put the veil back on his face, until he went in to speak to Him.*”

What an unbelievably transcendent description of the effects of an encounter with *HaMakom*: even post-Golden Calf, one leaves God’s Holy Presence aglow, with beams of light emanating so strongly that Moshe must return to his people with his face covered, lest the sheer magnificence of a “physical” encounter with God overwhelm a people not nearly ready for it. (In 80s pop parlance, Moses might’ve crooned: “*The Shechinah’s so bright, I gotta wear veils...*”)

Unfortunately for medieval interfaith dialogue and beyond, *karnei* were mistranslated in St Jerome’s 5th century Vulgate Latin translation of Torah as “horns” (from the Hebrew *keren*.) This mistranslation, which is evoked materially in Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses, caused no end of grief for Europe’s Jews for nearly 2,000 years.

(To illustrate the pernicious staying power of the ‘horns’ canard: on my first day meeting new floor mates at Reed Residence Hall at the University of Georgia in the 1980s, Lamar from Dahlonga, GA actually reached out to touch the horns on my head. Lamar and I later became friends. I was the first Jew he’d ever met. He had wanted to touch my horns in complete sincerity and with not an ounce of malice.)

The truth, however, is that the grief for Europe’s Jews would have come, mistranslation or no. No physical proof was needed by crusaders, Cossacks and everyday villagers alike to “prove” the blood libels or host desecrations. Likewise, a predisposition to see Jews as the devil incarnate was sufficient to believe, without proof and without a doubt, that all Jews have horns. The ordinary and extraordinary Jews of Mainz and Troyes and Lincoln and Frankfurt were expanding Moshe Rabbeinu’s *Karnei/Beams of Divine Light* in unbelievable ways, with their *berachot* and *yeshivot*, and their undying efforts to bring the Holy Spark to the most mundane moments of Medieval life. In their burning of the Talmud and burning of communities, much of Catholic Europe was doing all it could to extinguish that Spark.

In my vocation in life, I spend a great deal of time working with Catholic High School teachers and administrators for the Jewish Federation’s *Holy Land Democracy Project*. One of my

favorite *avocations* is to study the communities of Ashkenazi (France/Germany) Jewry in the Middle Ages. As you might imagine, there's some tension there. There is nary a starker or more painful example in the history of the world of a relationship of persistent vilification, dehumanization, subjugation and brutal oppression as the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jews of Europe, from at least the first Crusade through the *Shoah*. Most Catholics know next to nothing of that history. Most western Jews know few of the details, but carry in their bones an historical memory of 1,500+ years of pre-Holocaust terror.

In the early 1960s, groups of Catholics and Jews began working together on a reformulation of the Church's position vis-à-vis the Jewish people that became Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*. This reformulation was as revolutionary for our times as Luther's 99 Theses was for his. In fact, it remains the most revolutionary theological and real-world *secret* of the last century. It's a secret mostly to us Jews, who (if we even *know* about it) accept the importance of the statement without appreciating how, for Catholics and Jews, in 40+ short years, it has changed *everything*.

I now understand from my devout, involved Catholic friends that effecting change in a 2,000 year old institution like the Church is like turning around a battleship (actually, they tend to use analogies frequently less kind.) After 2,000 years of de-legitimization, for the Pope of most of the world's Christians to extol the covenant between God and Israel and acknowledge Christianity's debt to its "older sibling" is to turn around the world's largest battleship in the span of 5 years. Remarkable. And the advantages of a hierarchical church (and a laity which still is inclined to heed the direction from the top) are considerable. Outside of the most hidebound parishes, Catholics since 1965 have taught and been taught to see the Jewish people not as Christ-killers but as the well from which they've sprung. The theological journey of the Catholic parochial student vis-à-vis the Jewish people from 1964 to 2010 represents a total and radial transformation, one that promotes peace and eschews particularism and anti-Semitism in the deepest ways imaginable. The results from the parish level on up are in, and have been in for a few decades: *Nostra Aetate* worked.

I am blessed to see it every day in my work with Catholic educators and parochial students. I came into my work expecting first and foremost questions and challenges regarding the Jewish vision of messianic redemption – frankly, that has been a common experience for me at times, working with non-Catholic Christians. Surprisingly, the topic almost never comes up with Catholics. Instead, I get other kinds of questions. "*What are those boxes that you wear in the morning? Do they bring you closer to God?*" (They do.) "*How do Jews celebrate Sabbath?*" "*Can you come to our model Seder, Rabbi – we want to make it more Jewish this year, less, well, Christian. It's a Jewish thing, after all.*" I see classroom walls festooned with Hebrew – not familiar quotes from Isaiah, but the *V'ahavta*. I listen, astounded, as Catholic students enrolled at Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles High Schools begin their religious studies every day by reciting the *Shema*. I sit in classes discovering Early Church History by learning Mishna. I hear teachers stressing to their students "*You can't understand the Gospels without understand the Jewish culture, religion and people of ancient Palestine. Period.*" And the nearly ever-present, "*Guys, remember – Our Lord Jesus was a Jew.*"

Make no mistake, while the American Jewish Committee and Rabbi Heschel played roles in 1965, it was Catholic leadership which sent forth great beams of light from Rome. I've been

blessed to see that light both spread and amplified by Catholic High School teachers in LA. But they're not alone. I may not have heeded the call of my neighborhood Catholic Church trying to build a bridge to my synagogue, but it was there. The story about Lamar looking for my horns is far more entrenched in my memory banks – probably due to my own predispositions to expect to find ignorance and rejection in the Christian world – but my one experience performing a model Seder for eager students at the Newman Center was far more important. The Pope of the Roman Catholic World receives the Jews, Christians and Muslims of Los Angeles at the Vatican, and blesses them on their way to the Holy Land. A Google search for “Catholic-Jewish” returns too many wonderful lay and clerical dialogue groupings to possibly count. The Church has changed.

We can't for a moment criticize Jewish cynicism about the Roman Catholic Church in the year 2010. Now can we demand a change of heart on the part of Jews who know their history, or of a people still so close to the embers of Auschwitz. I don't believe there is a statute of limitations on these feelings; the teachings of Popes and the urgings of Priests going back almost 2,000 years rang in the ears of those who created the Final Solution and worked to carry it out.

And there's no denying the problems that exist today. The Catholic Left attacks Israel with a terrible jaundiced eye too often. The Catholic Right falls back in love too easily with old canards. The mainstream Church itself continues to exhibit a gross insensitivity to the existential meaning of the *Shoah* for the Jewish people, while growing far too slowly in its relationship with the State of Israel, the Jewish national home. And – to nitpick – earnest Catholics motivated towards serious interfaith study must accept that the Jews are not a people of the Bible – we are a people of the Rabbis. That means that it's important now to learn Mishnah and Talmud together as a way of truly understanding living Judaism. And it's vital to acknowledge that there's no true understanding of Torah itself without learning Hebrew.

But for those of us Jews deeply interested in growing the Jewish-Catholic relationship, we need to do even more. It ultimately is not enough for us to demand that our fellows understand what makes us suffer and leave it at that – that's not a dialogue. We must also ask what *our* fellow *loves*. We must return Catholic curiosity about Jewish practice with an appropriate respect for and curiosity about Christian rite and spirituality. We must earnestly ask the sacred questions at the heart of any religious person's heart, and give our word that their answers will be sacred to us. Just as the Catholic growing contextualization of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is informing and enriching Catholic understanding, we must both challenge our own fears of encountering the Christian messiah when dialoguing with respect. To hear another's statement of faith is not to adopt it or betray God and Torah. I recently asked a renowned Catholic interfaith theologian and activist what Jesus means to him. He stopped us in mid-walk, turned to me and said, “Rabbi, in 30 years of interfaith work with Jewish people that is the first time anyone has ever asked me that question. Thank you.” This need not be, and cannot be. My engagement in open Interfaith Dialogue has, ironically, resulted in a deeper engagement with daily *Tefillah* and daily *limmud* than I ever would have thought possible. When I share my love of *Am Yisrael* and Torah with our Catholic teachers while we stand at the Kotel together, they listen with love and respect. In

this new world for Catholics and Jews, can I extend anything less to them? Whether or not one feels religiously permitted to enter a Church or watch Mass from the back, there's nothing in the tradition which forbids listening with respect and love.

The *Karnei* in *Ki Tissah* are great Divine beams of light. The dark past need not be the future; mistranslations can be corrected and predispositions challenged and buried. May this year and all the years to come be ones of light for *Am Yisrael V'Kol Yashvei Tevel, Amen.*



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