

SIGNS AND PORTENTS

Drash by Barry Wendell

January 15, 2010

This was going to be a short drash, but something happened today that I want to mention, so I guess it won't be short after all. I'm not a great believer in signs and portents like the things Pharaoh saw in the days of Moses, but there was an earthquake the night before my fiftieth birthday party, and a freak thunderstorm the morning of our wedding, and another earthquake when Joe and I were on our house-hunting trip up north last week. There was damage in downtown Eureka, where we had stopped for lunch just a few hours before the quake.

When I left Miami in 1984, my office buddies asked what I wanted as a parting gift. I asked for a record album: "Sheila E in The Glamorous Life." It was a song about a girl who wanted to be rich and famous, but ultimately decides love is more glamorous than money. It became the theme of my move, and to some extent, my life in LA. So I was in our local Trader Joe's this afternoon, maybe for the last time, and that song was playing on their sound system. Like I said, I don't necessarily believe in those things, but I'm just sayin'.

Just over twenty-five years ago, I first walked into BCC. Not for services, but for David Katz's Sunday night Israeli dance class. Terrified by the AIDS crisis, I had decided not to be gay. I couldn't find an alternative identity, so I returned to being Jewish---and started dancing as fast as I could. Some of the women I danced with asked me to join them at BCC, and not wanting to look uptight, I went. It took another two years for me to come back out and join BCC. Janet Marder was still the rabbi, and although I remember Robin Tayback, *zichronah livracha* singing at services, I believe Don Croll had already started as cantor when I joined. It was Don who first suggested I sing with BCC's choir, at the appearance of the AIDS Quilt at UCLA.

At BCC at that time, many members had drag names. Some of you here still remember yours. Mine was "Miss Patty LuPone", because I had embarked on a career in stage and cinema. What was I thinking?

The nineties started with the death of my beloved grandmother. It was because she was in a nursing home in Florida that I began going to Project Caring. A year later, my father died, and my nephew Evan was born. I thought I might leave LA then, and go back to the East Coast to be with my family. But that didn't happen. Instead I met a new student rabbi, Lisa Edwards, and we became friends before she headed to New York to finish her rabbinic training.

Then the plagues started. From the late eighties and into the nineties, many men at BCC died from AIDS. Among them were Hal Wakker, Rue Starr, Fred Shuldiner, Art Horowitz, Brian Binder, and Ira Zucker. Women too seemed to be plagued by cancer. We lost Vicki Goldish, Vicki Dakil, Linda Mahru and Arlene Friedman Pardess, who hosted Sukkot for many years. Then there were the riots in 1992, floods and later fires in 1993, and finally, the Northridge earthquake in 1994. By this time, Lisa was back as the rabbi of BCC and I thought (at 44) that I might become a cantor. Lisa encouraged me and asked someone else to write a recommendation to The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, because they wouldn't at that time accept gay students in the Cantorial program. I didn't go, but I did become a soloist. I missed High Holy Day Services at BCC for seven years, and most Friday nights or three. By the late nineties, it looked like God had forgiven Los Angeles, and the plagues stopped.

I looked at the 00's, or whatever we call them, with optimism, at least until September 11, 2001. Then that December, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In February, 2003, I suffered a heart attack in Baltimore while visiting my mother. She died five weeks later. Sorry to mix Biblical allusions, but I wanted someone to comfort me as Rebecca comforted Isaac after the death of his mother, and I needed a Moses to take me out of plague-ridden Egypt.

That person, my Moshe, my Rebecca, my Joseph, showed up at BCC in 2005. An idiot, I thought. Changing careers in his late forties and thinking someone would hire him as a newly-minted gay rabbi at 52 in three and a half years--when he would be ordained. Now, he is taking me away from here, my Egypt, but also my home for close to half of my life, to go, not to a desert, but to a county with fewer people than The City of West Hollywood. It was hard for him to get a job, especially when I turned up with him at some of his interviews. But one place wanted him, and I'm enough of a believer to think it's *Beshert*, like when Rabbi Lisa said the word "embrace" at the end of services, and I sang the first line of "Embraceable You" and Joe sang the rest of the song.

At Yizkor on Yom Kippur in 2008, which I thought would be my last High Holy Days at BCC, I was feeling guilty about leaving behind my departed friends - Rue, Fred, Art, Sol and Vicki Goldish. Then, I felt their presence around me. They said, "Go - you've done all you can for us - it's time."

So we're off. We'll be back- at least to visit. Thanks for the friendships, the adventures, the inspiration. Thanks for my life the last twenty-five years. As it says in the Talmud, "Kiss today goodbye and point me towards tomorrow."