



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

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This weeks Haftorah, Behar, named after Behar Sinai, Mt. Sinai discusses among other things, the cycle of crops growing and the 7th sabbatical year. We learn that Hashem has commanded the Jewish people should grow crops for 6 years, but disallow them from harvesting or doing anything with any crops grown in the 7th year. The land was to be left alone to grow wild and free to be pick ed over by anyone who came upon the land in the 7th year. After 7 cycles of 7 years, we are commanded to take a 2nd year off, called the Jubilee year, which would be the 50th year. Effectively, the Jewish people would have to use the 6th year's crops to maintain them for an additional 2 years. Hashem assured the people that the crops in the 6th year would be sufficient to maintain them during the sabbatical year.

Now we believe that Hashem gave all of our 613 commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This is one of them, and one of those cases, I believe, where, if you want to question the authenticity of the Torah coming from Hashem, we have a great opportunity. Had the Torah been written by a man or group of wise men, why would they be so crazy as to make a claim that the 6th year's crops would maintain the people for a 7th year, or after every 7 cycles, they should give the land an extra year off, and they will miraculously have a triple crop in the 48th year to last 3 years? It makes no sense. Who would make such a promise that surely could not be kept. The first cycle, when there was not enough crops, that would be the end of it.



ק"ק בתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

Who would follow a religion with bogus claims like that? Yet, for thousands of years the Jewish people followed this commandment and it proved to be fruitful for them as they also multiplied.

It seems to be our nature to inquire, and why not question the existence of Hashem? Yet after all the inquiring minds of the last few thousand years, we are still here and have maintained the same beliefs throughout. The audacity it would have taken for anyone other than Hashem to have written in all those miracles when there were over 1 million witnesses to the Exodus from Egypt is just another way to rationalize his existence.

The unbroken chain of the telling of that Exodus from Father to son, from then until now, and from your father to you is just another way to be certain Hashem's existence is real.

I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you a little about myself and my involvement in Keter Torah Synagogue.

I was recently interviewed by a woman who flew from Israel specifically to interview Egyptian Jews for her Doctoral dissertation. During the interview she posed a few questions I couldn't give thoughtful answers to on the spot. I woke up at 5 the next morning compelled to put those thoughts on paper.

She wanted to know what it meant to be an Egyptian Jew; if there were any Egyptian characteristics that continued forward from my father; If I had realized any differences from other Jews / Americans growing up or today?

Those are pretty big existential questions to wrap your head around on the spur of the moment in front of a video camera, and my feeble response in the moment was less than sufficient. The idea of who I am and where I come from and the meaning of my ancestry on the makeup of who I individually am has always been difficult to pinpoint.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

I have stood on this Bima as President of Keter Torah Synagogue, many times, amazed to look out at 30-40 people and identify 15-20 countries of origin amongst the attendees.

So I have been pondering these questions to begin to understand who I am and how I fit into this world, this region, this community, this congregation, and this family of mine.

To begin with, my mother, Shirley Chicorel Behar is the youngest child of immigrants from Izmir, Turkey who lived there for 400+ years out of Spain. She was the only one of her siblings to marry another Sephardic Jew. The others all married Ashkenazim.

My Mom's parents came to this country from Turkey to escape persecution. They were Sephardim through and through, steeped in the religious, cultural, social, culinary and linguistic traditions of their people. My grandfather was the founder, spiritual leader and religious voice of the Sephardic Community of Greater Detroit. My grandmother was the glue that held the family and larger Sephardic Community together. They had a desire to continue to reflect their religious and cultural identity here in America where you could easily melt right in and call yourself American, and live your life based on the honest and hardworking principles and promise of the American Dream, on which this country was founded.

So the Sephardic Community existed to reflect a part of the old country in the New World, and to give hope and refuge and new beginnings to a whole wave of immigrants from myriad places who had similar visions and aspirations.

My father was born in Egypt in 1924. His parents were also born in Turkey, but had a slightly different experience. My Nono was born in 1885 and by 1895 had already moved to Israel. Unbeknownst to him, he had become part of the wave of separation from the old ways on the hopes of survival and development visualized by Charles Netter through the Alliance Israelite Universelle movement. His A.I. scholarship freed him from the usual Jewish educational methods and any religious rigors, but empowered him with a more practical education in agricultural science in which he was a genius. He studied then taught at Mikveh Israel in modern Israel.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

In October 1912, he landed in Turkey in the hopes of finding a paying job, but immediately found that the Balkan war was about to break out. As an Ottoman citizen he sought to avoid being forced into the army. He escaped Turkey as a stow away after bribing a Greek sailor. After being found out, he was brought to the captain who immediately recognized him as the guide who showed him around Mikveh Israel. The captain was the nephew of the Romanian Minister of Agriculture and was asked to discover new ideas on agriculture from the Innovative Mikveh Israel. My Nono was then given private quarters until they landed in Egypt, then an Ottoman Province, where he ultimately made his fortune overseeing wealthy land barons (including those of Madame Gali, the mother of Boutros Boutros) properties causing them and himself to flourish.

It can be said that after 1956, when my grandparents were targeted by Nasser, expelled from Egypt, removed of all their financial assets, and immigrated to America almost penniless, that the A.I. experimental educational method left them poor, effectively devoid of the religious training that sustained their people for thousands of years, and in unfamiliar territory in the senior years of their lives. Still, they knew exactly where they came from.

They imparted a sense of the cultural, culinary historical and linguistic traditions on their children, if not the in depth spiritual and religious aspects. My grandfather spoke 10 languages, my father speaks 7, but Hebrew was not one of them, despite the fact that my grandfather, Nissim Michel Behar's, neighbor in Turkey was another Nissim Behar, and his next door neighbor in Israel was none other than Ben Yehuda (the two founders of the modern Hebrew language).

My father had a privileged upbringing filled with all the benefits that affluence can bring, and minus many of the things that affluence has caused many to leave behind. His childhood was spent in exclusive Boarding Schools with the children of the Affluent Elite and Empowered. While he knew he was a Jew, he did not let that stand in the way of becoming a part of the educational and world view system taught at the Elite Victoria College.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

It educated and formed the basis for his entire life. It benefited him in so many ways, and made him one of the most intelligent and certainly unique people many of you who know him have ever met or known.

Therein lies the conundrum.

I was born in Detroit in 1961, and grew up in the household with an immigrant, but Elite British school educated Middle Eastern father imbued with the credo that hard work, proper schooling, solid ethics and morality will lead to a bright future filled with opportunity. I was raised by an empathetic, spiritually connected mother with all the tools of a good Sephardic woman at her disposal. She had the language, the songs, the foods, the sense of community, and the desire for her children to know where they came from and who they are in the cultural/spiritual/ religious ways you can know who you are. But alas, she was not educated in the ways of her own religion. Although she spends much of her adult life trying to learn what she did not as a child.

Still, as the youngest of 7 kids, she along with her siblings, were not formally educated in the religious training that their own father had had in Izmir under the tutelage of world renowned Rabbi Al-Gazi. Their father, who had established a Sephardic Cultural and Religious community and ranked as its spiritual and religious leader, had let his own children slip into the path of an American Dream his parents could never have foreseen.

3 of his own 4 sons, were not even Bar Mitzvah'd by their father.

I can see he likely thought and hoped it might be the best for them. After all, when he first arrived here, he was not even acknowledged as being a Jew at all since he did not speak Yiddish. He may have felt himself a marginalized somewhat lost and dying breed. He spent his life trying to establish this community while trying to simultaneously poise his family to reach their own American Dream.

I have realized in my own life it is hard to stand alone, or even in a small group when trying to educate your children immersed in the ocean of American Dreams.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

So I grew up like that, and maybe some of you grew up like that too, or have kids growing up like that now. We educated our father on the rules and nuances of American sports. We tutored him in the ways of the American media machine we were being fed every day. Our father maintained a solid work ethic in his corporate world. One time during an 8th grade debate on the pros and cons of Napoleon Bonaparte's impact, I was the only student in the class to take the positive argument. With guidance from my father I learned all the benefits Napoleon brought to the world despite his glaring negatives. In the classroom, it was me against 24 other students, and I won the debate easily while overwhelmingly convincing other students to join my side.

That was a microcosm of my whole childhood. I knew I was different by being a Jew. I also knew I was not like other Jews. I was a Sephardic Jew. And even amongst Sephardic Jews, I was a Turkish / Egyptian Sephardic Jew. In my mind I wanted to be a part of something bigger, like the American Dream, but I also wanted to keep what was unique to me. I had to stand up and accept being the me that I was in order to ultimately be the me that was part of a greater whole.

Everyone has a story and a past. Everyone has a future and is part of some historical background. That is part of what makes us all unique. While I understood that a long time ago, for me, what set me apart, was that I never met anyone who was exactly like me. I did not know a single other contemporary American Born Sephardic Turkish / Egyptian Jew.

Our small community was predominantly Sephardic (Ashkenazic spouses enjoyed saying they converted), but totally disjointed from any form of regional commonality. What originally started out as a Turkish Sephardic club embraced all the displaced Sephardim who streamed into Detroit during each international regional conflict resulting in hardship on the Jews. Pretty soon, we had a few hundred members and more than 35 countries represented. Today, we count less than 50 families as members of this synagogue opened in 2002 yet we still represent immigrants from more than 20 countries.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

Personally, it took this interview in order for me to really consider all these little details.

I was and am a splinter of a fragmented community. I never knew the whole, and can spend my whole life trying to rebuild it but never could. I am alone in who I am. But I am not alone in this regard in this room or in this community. What I am and where I am from will never be what it was or what it could have become if not for international and religious conflict.

I have a choice to fold and pack it in and be the best I can be for myself and my family to create the optimal life for them based on the elusive American Dream we have come to be led to seek.

However, I have taken another option. I have strived to regain a piece of the lost past that all this international conflict strife and intrigue spewed upon us. I can return to some of the traditions that my ancestral parents followed for thousands of years and then 500 hundred years out of Spain, before all the political and religious posturing caused many to rethink what had already been thought through.

I can regain that part of me which might have been instilled in me as a child if not for those matters. I will never be the person that I would have become in that place in this time. But I am the me that I am. I am proud of who I am. I am thankful for what my parents did for me; what they went through to bring me to a place where I can think about and express these thoughts. I am enlightened by the hope that in spite of the trials and tribulations of my recent generations of ancestors, I have considered their plight and chosen to honor them and return to some part of my lost past.

I may be a splintered fragment of what was once a whole piece of a community, but I share that commonality with all of my fellow congregants and likely every one of you here today. None of us came to this country en masse with their whole community. None of us can say that we are part of the community our recent generations had in our old countries. Instead, we stand alone or nearly alone in our uniqueness. Each of us wondering how to explain it to ourselves and if possible, who else to explain it to.



ק"ק כתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

Who would even care enough to listen? Who would anything we have to say have any impact on?

Well, let us say it to each other and ourselves. We matter. We care, and We will listen. Despite our individuality, we are members of THIS Greater and specific community. We forge our bonds of uniqueness and individuality into creating our own communities right here in Michigan. We stood our ground and retained our identity while simultaneously acknowledging our participation in the pursuit of OUR own American Dreams.

Because, the Truth is, WE ARE living the American Dream. Pursuing The American Dream does not have to mean losing yourself and any sense of who you are and where you came from. The American Dream has and will always be a n elusive target with millions of meanings.

For us, the splintered, fragmented, marginalized and downtrodden us, that we were, but have sought to improve upon, OUR American Dream is feeling confident about retaining who we were and melding that into who we are. We must Understand and embrace who we are, in order to create an environment to educate and express all our hopes and desires to continue this on for our children, their children and their children. We seek to be able to grow in a community that gives us the respect we deserve while we must also acknowledge and share space with others following a version of their own American Dream as well.

We are only about 150 generations separated from Moses and out of Egypt. Our ancestors maintained a regimen of education spirituality religion and cultural identity written in stone and on scrolls before any one of us arrived on this planet. Regardless of how we were raised or what international calamities we survived to get to this place and moment, we are here right now at Keter Torah Synagogue.

What we do with our time and resources while WE are here is the true test of how we spent our time on this earth.



ק"ק בתר תורה
Congregation Keter Torah

How will you be remembered, what will you do to insure the survival of your splinter of the whole that is your Family, your Community, and that is your version of the American Dream?

There is a reason we are here today, and there is a good reason why we should want this place, Keter Torah Synagogue to not only survive, but grow and be here for tomorrow's children. You may not consider yourself to be a part of THIS community, but we are all really part of each other's communities, and Keter Torah is a worthwhile and deserving community.

We might not realize it but we are each integral to the others pursuit of and ownership of our individualized versions of our American Dreams. Help us, help me, to take care of this home to this community, the Spiritual home of our American Dream that is Keter Torah Synagogue.

May Hashem bless you all with health and the will, strength and means to support yourselves, your families and your communities so that each of us individually, and all of us as a community will be blessed by Hashem. May the impact of our lives have merit with Hashem, so that our deeds and mitzvot may benefit our families and our community for now and for times to come.

Shabat Shalom

Ricky Behar, President, Keter Torah Synagogue

Presented May 14, 2011 on the celebration of my 50th Birthday.

Keter Torah Synagogue

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