

Liberal Jewish Synagogue,
December 2nd, 2000
Toledot

Appointment of U.K. Governours of the Abraham Geiger College Potsdam

by Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka

In rabbinic parlance, water stands for Torah. The association is basic and self-evident: both are life-giving elements.

As water sustains organic life, so Torah nourishes Jewish life. Thus when Isaiah calls out, "Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money (Isaiah 55:1)," the Rabbis take his words as an invitation to enter the world of Torah.

The bedrock of synagogue practice, the regular reading of the Torah rests on this analogy. No more than three days are to go by without a public recitation of Scripture. According to the narrative of Exodus, after crossing the Sea of Reeds, the people of Israel wander in the wilderness for three days without sign of water, quickly erasing any memory of previous miracles and leading to popular unrest (Exodus 15:22). The Talmud treats the episode metaphorically: Three days without exposure to any word of Torah was more than Israel could endure.

And so at some point, prophetic leadership established the custom to read from the Torah liturgically, not only on Shabbat morning, but also on Shabbat afternoon and on Monday and Thursday mornings. The very day we complete one parasha in the morning, we start the next one in the afternoon and do so twice more during the week. To be removed from Torah is as fatal as a drought.

The identity of water and Torah is a rabbinic analogy, but offers a clue to interpreting an obscure fragment in the life of Isaac.

Though our parasha bears the name "This is the story of Isaac," it recounts tantalizingly little about his adult life. Yet the Torah sees it fit to devote a half-dozen verses (Genesis 26:17-22) to tell us of Isaac's efforts to restore to working order the wells built by his father.

"Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them (26:18)." The Philistines, in whose territory Isaac resided at the time, tried to block his plan, but he managed to reactivate at least three wells (and perhaps a fourth - 26:32).

Commentators, both old and new, have stayed away from the passage. Its prosaic quality appears to add little to the biography of Isaac. I would like to suggest that the meaning of the fragment inheres in its implicit rather than explicit content.

The episode points to the loyalty of Isaac to his father's legacy. Isaac does not merely reside where his father once lived nor drink from the same water, but, more importantly, abides by the teachings he embodied. The imagery of a son seeking to re-appropriate the wells that sustained his father resonates with symbolic overtones of healing a grievous breach.

It is no accident that the first time Isaac perceives the God who addresses him as the God of his father occurs directly after the restoration of the wells (26:24).

There is much in the Torah's narrative to imply that Isaac's loyalty to the faith of his father was badly strained by the ordeal of the "binding" at Mount Moriah.

For one, Isaac does not return to Beersheba with Abraham (22:19). Had the concord and

intimacy of their relationship been ruptured?

Second, Isaac mourns intensely when Sarah dies, remaining unconsolated until Rebecca enters his life (24:67).

Did he, perhaps, attribute her death after the "binding," as the midrash does, to the unfathomable behavior of Abraham?

Had he taken shelter in her protective love, rather than his father's?

Third, after his sons are born, Isaac prefers Esau, "a skilled hunter, a man of the outdoors (25:27)," who scarcely exhibits any interest in such matters as justice and righteousness that we identify with Abraham (18:19).

The tale of the wells is intended to modify that impression.

Isaac did not remain permanently estranged from the faith of his father. He struggled to overcome the scars of his terror, to understand the silent anguish of his impervious father and the meaning of that searing event. He returned to remove the debris, which had covered and contaminated the wells, so that he might drink again from their sacred water.

But to internalize that legacy, he needed to prune it of its overwrought accretions, to regain its balance and integrity, to make it work for him.

The philistines of every generation seek to curb the protean character of a healthy tradition.

Transmission is a dynamic, interactive process governed by both responsiveness and reverence. The custodians of tradition must feel the pain of the faithful even as they heed the voice of God.

No one has caught the creative spirit of this dialectical relationship more sharply than the incomparable German writer Goethe: "What you have inherited (passively) from your ancestors, take hold of it (actively) in order to make it your own."

We in Germany also struggle very hard to overcome the scars of terror and to relate anew to the noble Jewish heritage which we inherited as a task for the future: to bring back progressive Judaism to the country where once its cradle stood.

When Israel Jacobson founded the Jewish Free School in the town of Seesen in 1811 some two hundred years ago it was one of the important milestones of Judaism's entry into modern times.

All significant movements in contemporary Judaism base themselves on the courageous encounter between tradition and modernity in Germany some two hundred years ago: Reform, Liberal and Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionism and- as a counter-balance to these movements -Modern Orthodox Judaism.

Two hundred years later, in 1961, a growing number of progressive Jews in Germany is still dedicated to the task of renewing Jewish tradition within the context of today. We celebrate this jubilee under the motto "Reform 200: Judaism with a Future".

And opening Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam has been our single most important achievement. Like Isaac we dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of our ancestors.

Abraham Geiger College is the first rabbinical seminary in the German-speaking world since the Shoah destroyed the institutions of learning that were created in the Nineteenth century. With Abraham Geiger College, we are continuing the work of the "Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums" in Berlin which was closed by the Nazis in 1942.

In the tradition of this institution and in memory of the Breslau Jewish Theological Seminary Abraham Geiger College Potsdam will educate and train rabbis, cantors, and religion school teachers. The alumni of this seminary will be able to make an indispensable contribution to the intellectual leadership of Progressive Judaism in Central Europe, adding to the impressive efforts and immense achievements of so many in recent years.

To fulfil this effort as a prophetic mission we listen to Isaiah (55:1): "Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money".

Consequently, we have secured tenured professorships at Potsdam University for the teachers at Abraham Geiger College. We will not need to charge tuition fees and also have rich funds for full scholarships and awards to cover living expenses of students who cannot afford to finance their studies.

As a sign of great admiration and appreciation for your emeritus rabbi Deutsche Bank in Germany has also decided to create one of these awards and name it after Rabbi John Rayner's parents who have both been employed by Deutsche Bank before World War II.

I am very glad to be here with you to share that the President of Abraham Geiger College, Rabbi Dr. Walter Jacob, on November 12 has created four noble governours of Geiger College from the United Kingdom as keepers of the well of tradition and as a way to soothe the wounds of terror:

Rabbi Julia Neuberger

Rabbi Dr. John D. Rayner, CBE

The Lord Weidenfeld, Baron of Chelsea

Rabbi Rodney Mariner

All four of them have close biographic links with the Germany of the past or the present. Three of them are of German or Austrian families, Rabbi Mariner currently serves as Convenor of the Union Bet Din in Halberstadt.

We are very glad to strengthen the ties of our progressive Jewish world family with these appointments in the spirit of co-operation and solidarity.

I am very grateful that Rabbi John Rayner and Rabbi Julia Neuberger are present to receive the appointments in person:

(handing over of insignia)

May the work of Abraham Geiger College be to the benefit of many Jewish congregations in the German-speaking world and in Continental Europe.

May it offer many Jews an opportunity of learning so as to assume active responsibility for a Judaism with a future.

May it finally send out signs of appreciation and openness to our gentile neighbours: our dedication to diversity, pluralism and dialogue is substantial and genuine.

May God bless teachers, officers, students, and graduates of Abraham Geiger College.

Baruch ata adonai schehecheyanu vekijemanu vehigianu lasman hase.

Amen