

Message for *Parashat Lech L'cha*

11 November 2016

“Home Sweet Home”

In the first installment of the very popular series about Oz published in 1900, L. Frank Baum, writes about the terrible shock that Dorothy felt when she realized that everything around her had dramatically changed, and that she was no longer home.

“Oh, gracious!" cried Dorothy. "Are you a real witch?"

"Yes, indeed," answered the little woman. "But I am a good witch, and the people love me. [...]"

"But I thought all witches were wicked," said the girl, who was -frightened at facing a real witch. [...] “Aunt Em has told me that the witches were all dead--years and years ago."

"Who is Aunt Em?" inquired the little old woman.

"She is my aunt who lives in Kansas, where I came from."

The Witch of the North seemed to think for a time, with her head bowed and her eyes upon the ground. Then she looked up and said, "I do not know where Kansas is, for I have never heard that country mentioned before. But tell me, is it a civilized country?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dorothy.

We are so glad that you are able to join us in this civilized part of the world. At least we can be sure that inside the walls of this sanctuary we know that to be true. Inside our congregation, the highest ethical values of our tradition are still valid and relevant. We are still a welcoming congregation and movement. We reject misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and bullying. Our movement, the Reform Movement, issued a declaration early on Wednesday, proclaiming:

“We welcome all: Jews and non-Jews, people of all races and religions, of all sexual orientations and gender identities and the immigrants among us. That welcome is the essence of who we are as a community, and who we are as a country, and that remains as true today as it has ever been.”

I want you to know that if you feel marginalized, left-out in any way, this is **your** home. It is true, “There is no place like home.” One can say that Dorothy’s source of anxiety, both in the book, “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,” and in the 1939 movie adaptation, “The Wizard of Oz,” resides in the longing to find a home of her own. First by running away from home and rejecting what she saw as an “unfair” situation, and then, by desperately trying to find her way back home.

L. Frank Baum, the author of the original book, was not Jewish, so we cannot claim him; however, the movie, “The Wizard of Oz,” had plenty of Jewish content, if one pays attention and knows what to look for. Jewish people associated with the films included the producer, one of the screenplay writers, some of the actors, and the composer of the music, but there is more.

Rachel Shukert, who writes for the New Yorker and other publications, suggests that the most enduring legacy of the film is the song, “Over the Rainbow,” which happens to be the most “Jewish” thing about the film.

On its face, there is nothing Jewish or unusual about the song. It is a classic version of what musical-theater writers call the “I want” song, which is exactly what it sounds like. The song itself plays a common function within the conventions of Broadway musicals then and now. The main character, Dorothy, sings about her dreams and hopes.

“Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly

Birds fly over the rainbow.

Why then, oh, why can't I?

If happy little bluebirds fly

Beyond the rainbow.

Why, oh, why can't I?"

Reaching her goal would take her far away, further than “beyond the rainbow,” and then back home. Yet, “Over the Rainbow” could be heard in a different context, outside the movie itself, as a song of longing to find a safe home away from persecution and hatred.

The song was commissioned for the film, independently of the movie score itself. The music was composed by Harold Arlen (born Hyman Arluck) and the lyrics were written by Yip Harburg (born Isadore Hochberg). Both were sons of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, and very aware of the rise of Nazism in Europe and Anti-immigration rhetoric here in America in the early 1930's. The song was recorded by Judy Garland in October of 1938, a month before Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, 78 years ago this past Wednesday. Now, just for a moment, forget about Judy Garland, Dorothy, and Kansas, and imagine that a little Jewish girl, in Germany, in 1938, is experiencing the hatred of the Nazis, and she sings:

“Somewhere over the rainbow way up high
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby
Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

It is the same song, but sung by a voice other than Dorothy's. There is a sense of yearning for another place: a place of safety and hope, far away. The land that the girl heard of once is not Oz but America, our country. This is the place where “dreams really do come true.”

Rachel Shukert writes,

“[...] its haunting melody and searching lyrics don't long for adventure or glamor or romance; in fact, quite the opposite. The primary wish expressed in “Over the Rainbow” is one for safety. [...] It's both an incredibly reasonable wish and an incredibly difficult one.”

But that it is difficult does not mean that we can stop dreaming of the land beyond the rainbow. The question is, as Shukert puts it, “how do you know when you get there? When do you know you’re truly safe? When can one say that this is home and there is no place like home?” Is it when everyone has the right to marry whom they love, or worship as they wish, or go anywhere in our country in safety and peace, regardless of the color of their skin or the name on an ID card?

For some of us, like myself, who emigrated from a distant land, “home” was once thousands of miles away. I still get the question: “And where is home for you, young man?” It is a deeply offensive question, if you ask me. The underlying question is: “What are you doing here, in my country?” I have lived in the Mid-West for 22 years, almost as long as I lived in Argentina. Home is where you choose to be, for sure, but home is also the place where you do not have to give any explanations about why, when, and how.

The challenge is not on those who are different to do everything they can to fit in. The challenge is on all of us. Everyone of us has the responsibility to make “the other” welcome in our country. Since the election on Tuesday it might have gotten harder for some of us to feel welcome and valued in our own country, but it does not mean that we should throw the towel and give up.

I recently learned, that safety pins have become a symbol of solidarity with refugees and other migrants since the historic Brexit vote to leave the European Union in June. Now, people in the United States are showing that they are allies with groups -including LGBT, minorities and women, who feel threatened by what a Trump presidency might bring. Where we choose to wear a safety pin or show our solidarity in other ways, this election is an opportunity to come together and show the other half that we get it: Home is where everyone is welcome.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who went through so many difficulties, taught us, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I would add, it bends but it never breaks. In light of our song, nowadays our arc is a

rainbow, a multicolored arc in which each one of us is a color; we bend together as on towards a more just and equitable society. We dream and we pray: May we, one day, reach that land someone once heard of in a lullaby, the land of opportunity and tolerance, the land of diversity and acceptance, that land that we know lies just beyond the rainbow. And may it be speedily in our own time, *bimherah v'yamenu*.