

Yom Kippur 5772/2011

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

### “The Bones and the Tablets”

Only this week did I have my first opportunity – in my entire life - to visit my great-grandparents’ graves. It was only this month that I even discovered where they were, thanks to a dedicated third-cousin in Boston who knows how to forage through the genealogical jungle, and who found me last spring on Ancestry.com.

Last Sunday we met as planned in Newark, at a cluster of three Jewish cemeteries right off the Garden State Parkway. I need to tell you that these cemeteries in Newark are well-known but seldom visited. The neighborhood is so dangerous that the Metro-West UJA-Federation arranges for the Essex County Sheriff’s Office to send armed patrols to guard visitors on this one day of the year, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, from 10 AM to 2 PM. That’s it. You get four hours to scurry among these three cemeteries; to climb between the rows of weeds and tightly-packed toppling grave stones; to locate your loved ones, snap some photos, place a pebble, and scam.

I had long known these ancestors' names. I have one photograph of them. They are my father's paternal grandparents. They came to America from Bialystok in the 1890's with their only child, my grandfather Max Lester Bronstein. They raised him in Newark. My father was born in Newark, though raised elsewhere. I assumed these folks were buried somewhere near there, but no one had ever passed on the information. We hadn't a clue. And, to tell you the truth, we hadn't tried very hard to uncover any clues.

Like the famous missing grave of Moses our Teacher, no one in the family knew the burial site. No one knew the Hebrew names. We only had a vague record of the yahrzeit dates. I guess people had wanted to forget, to move on; to dwell on the present and the enticing American future.

Suddenly I was standing there at these graves, only forty-nine miles from where I've lived and raised my own children. There we were, a gathering of distant cousins, meeting for the first time ourselves, sharing bits of history and names and other information. Most could read the Hebrew on the stones, though they relied on me to decipher the abbreviations and florid quotes.

I stood there marveling at how these ancestors of ours, who had left the Jewish cocoon of Eastern Europe to live in exile from everything ancient and Yiddish, nonetheless retained both the literacy and the commitment to making their gravestones reflect the rich history of their past. The wordings on the stones were sophisticated, nuanced, and old-worldly, so different from Jewish stones today. The English appeared only at the bottom, essentially as a translation of the primarily Hebrew message on each stone. So that even before reading the content, I had learned that my great-grandparents and their cousins valued their Jewish literacy, or perhaps took it for granted as a basic aspect of their identity.

On my great-grandfather's stone were the words: *po nikbar* - Here lies buried - *avinu ha-yakar* - our dear father - *mem-vav-hey Lazer b'reb Avraham*, - Lazer son of Abraham, and then the date of death in precise Hebrew. Louis A. Bronstein. Died in October of 1934. I'll tell you that looking at this stone gave me the first inkling I ever had as to where my own name Lazer, Eliezer, Lester, came from. The abbreviation *mem-vav-hey* I'll save for the end, because it was the biggest surprise of all.

I'll come back to my story. But let me go to something I mentioned a moment ago. I didn't know where these close family members were buried. Why do we not know where Moses, Moshe Rabbenu, is buried? The Torah makes a big deal of it, only seven lines from the end of the scroll: ...*v'lo yada ish et k'vurato ad hayom hazeh*. "No one knows his burial place, even to this very day," as if to warn us against going out to look for it *even today*, the way we might do for our long-lost relatives in Newark or Bialystok.

You know the standard answer, even though the Torah itself doesn't give it to us: If we knew where he was buried, we would go there and perhaps worship him, turn him into a deity.

Actually, the Midrash gives a very different answer, which is telling with respect to the Rabbis' understanding of both Moses and Yom Kippur. It says that at the time the Israelites said farewell to Moses and prepared to enter the Land of Israel without him, God had already decreed that in the distant future their descendants would be exiled from the Land on account of their collective sinfulness (cf. my sermon from last week), and that this dismal information was passed on to the Israelites themselves. Thus, if they had known where Moses was buried, they

would be tempted to go there and plead for him to intercede and cancel the decree. Or, perhaps the exiles themselves would have gone there a thousand years later and asked for mercy.

And Moses would have come through, says the Midrash, and God would have had to relent! Such was the Rabbis' notion of the power of *t'shuvah*, or of Moses, or of God's eagerness to show mercy, to find some divine loophole in order to give us poor Yidden a break!

Now remember that in the Rabbis' mythic calculation, the first tablets are broken on Tisha b'Av. Moses goes back up the mountain on the first of Elul. Forty days later he descends, repentant and forgiven, with a new covenant on a new set of tablets: on Yom Kippur! So Yom Kippur for our Sages was like nuclear energy: very potent, very dangerous, and most efficacious in the hands of someone who knows how to use it.

Now, I found another version of the answer. But to get it, you'll have to be reminded of yet another profound little passage in the Torah. You'll recall that the

Book of Genesis ends with Joseph's dying wish that his descendants eventually take his bones with them when they leave Egypt, *v'ha'alitem et atzmotai mi-zeh*.

And so they do. They bring that box of bones to Mount Sinai, where it seems they trade the ancient patriarchal Genesis story of tribal identity for the Exodus story of covenant and Torah. But from then on and throughout the wandering in the Midbar, the wilderness, the Israelites schlep both the box of bones and the box with the tablets of the Covenant. Both identities lead the way: the bones of family, of *amcha*, of people-hood; AND the tablets of *b'rit*, of covenant, of theology and mitzvot and halakhah and belief.

Which identity holds sway in the forty years' journey? Which exerts the greater claim on these former slaves? A reasonable answer might be: neither one. Neither the claim of people-hood nor the claim of commitment to God's will seems to work. That's why they live and die as the *dor hamidbar*, the "wilderness generation" who can't seem to make the move from slavery to social responsibility.

Now comes the final answer to our quiz: Why do we not know the burial place of Moses? Says a Midrash, it's because God fears that if it becomes known that Moses is buried anywhere near the graves of the *dor hamidbar*, that undeserving and non-committal generation of the wilderness, then they themselves will rise up, take up Moses's bones just as he had shown them how to do with Joseph's bones, and carry them into the Land of Israel with their teacher Moses, as it were, at the lead!

And that is precisely what God could NOT allow to take place! Not only could the *dor hamidbar* not find that all-important balance between Jewish people-hood and Jewish covenant, but they could not even commit themselves to either one! They were awful at Jewishness, and they stank at Judaism! Says the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish rabbi Yerucham Warhaftig in his comment on this midrash, "Otherwise the generation of the wilderness would bring up the bones of Moses – and then who would bring up THEIR bones?!" Who indeed!

In other words, who among the Jewish people after Moses would be qualified to bear the unbearable burden of apathy, ignorance, fear, and, worst of all, *non-*

*commitment* among an entire population of Jews who would then be called upon to constitute Jewish life in the next phase of our historic destiny?

Can you tell that Rabbi Warhaftig is not really talking about the Israelites crossing the ancient Jordan? Or that the Sages writing this midrash are also not talking about the Israelites crossing the Jordan? That they are really talking about the Jews of their own time? Of OUR own time?

Don't you think the very editors of the Torah were facing this crisis of identity way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, just back from exile in Babylonia? Don't you see that that's why they gave us the hugely tribal Book of Genesis, to get us to love being part of this family, do or die; and then gave us the hugely covenantal Book of Exodus to shock us into realizing that tribe alone does not make for a meaningful existence?

Don't you see that throughout Jewish history, this split between the gut and the head has been our near downfall, and that the weaving of the two together has been our salvation?

Jewishness or Judaism. Gut or head. Folk or Religious community. Amcha or Torah. It can't be one or the other. It only works if we have both.

Before we go further, I want us to acknowledge these two very powerful – very different – pulls on the heartstrings of *this* throng. Some of us are here tonight because we have to be here. Some of us want to be here. Some of us need to be here. The pull of mitzvah. Of tradition. Of commandment. Of family. Of history. Of meaning, or spirit, or spirituality. Or, good old-fashioned guilt.

Those pulls on us can compete with one another and cancel each other out; or they can work together. They can counteract, like the famous ox and ass yoked to the same plow; or they can interact, and pull in the same direction like twin animals.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, those two forces worked against one another, and nearly tore the Jewish enterprise apart. The Jews split into religionists and nationalists. Two competing visions of what it meant to be a Jew.

It led to, among other things, today's great loyalty among some of us to the cause of the State of Israel; and also to today's deep ambivalence among others of us to that very same Jewish state.

It led to a particularism among some of us that sometimes, at its extreme, manifests itself in Jewish xenophobia; and, at the other extreme, to an aversion among some of us to anything smacking of the Jewishly particular, and even to a xenophobia toward other Jews.

Our own rebbe, Mordecai Kaplan, tried to bring together the ethical universalism of the Reform religionists with the spiritual devotion of the Orthodox religionists, with the "*amcha*" folkism of the secularists, the nationalists, and the Zionists. He tried to meld the idealism of the spiritual monotheists with the survivalist pragmatism of the Jews who went to Palestine, or who built the great so-called defense organizations like the AJCommittee, the AJCongress, the ADL, the Jewish Federations, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and so forth.

That is the back story behind his famous re-write of the Torah blessing: not “you chose us from among all peoples,” but you nevertheless “called *us* near to your service.”

And let’s admit that Rabbi Kaplan did not do a bad job of bringing these opposite forces together, or at least of identifying the need for the rest of us to try. A lot of us are here under this Reconstructionist tent because we feel in our gut AND in our rational minds the pull of both *b’rit* and *am*, covenant and tribe; that both will need to play large roles in the Judaism we hope to bequeath to our grandchildren.

But now we need to do *our* share. We can’t bring Kaplan’s bones around with us in a box! Nor Heschel’s. Nor Ben Gurion’s, or Herzl’s, or Rabin’s, or Arik Sharon’s. Nor the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s, or those of any other rebbe or statesperson or war hero. Nor those of our own great-grandparents of blessed memory, who seemed to know so much more than we know about traditional Jewish life, but who could pass on just so much to us before it became both enhanced and diluted by the American or the Israeli experience.

The time has come for us to use the power of *this* Yom Kippur, this night when Moses came down the mountain with a new set of tablets, to commit *ourselves* to carrying our own legs across the Jordan, toward a vibrant Judaism that combines love of our people with love for our values; that melds what modern Israelis call “*amiut*,” “people-hood,” with *yahadut*, the profoundly spiritual-intellectual-ethical religious tradition we began not in Abraham’s and Sarah’s tent, but at Sinai.

We need to stop fighting over which form, which brand, which stream, which movement, which approach to Jewish life is best. We need to stop fearing and start embracing the remarkable strides we’ve recently made in reviving the spirituality, the *ruchaniut*, of the Jewish experience. So too, we need to stop disparaging those Jews who dare to use everything from politics to connections to money to *sechel* and savvy to protect us from those very real and determined enemies of the Jewish people. Time to combine forces!

We need to get our marginal and not-so-marginal American Jews to comprehend and care deeply about the existential struggle our Israeli siblings bear up to every day. And likewise we need to get Israelis to see that a solely survivalist existence without a firm foundation of Jewish ethical values is no survival to speak of.

My great-grandparents lying in repose in that horrid slum in Newark would not recognize the landscape of Jewish life today. Nor would Moses have known what to make of the kingdoms of David and Solomon, or of the rabbinical academies at Sura and Pumbeditha. Better to let their bones lie in peace.

But they would recognize the argument. It's the same *machloket*. It's *am* vs. *b'rit*. People-hood and family and tribe vs. covenant and Torah and values. And the answer is the same in every generation: *Both boxes need to get across the wilderness to the river. Both the bones and the tablets.*

And the surprise ending? *Mem-vav-hey* is the abbreviation for *morenu ha-rav*.

“Our teacher, our rabbi.” That was the notation on my great-grandfather's *matzeva*.

My namesake Lazer was a rabbi. Probably not a practicing one, but a rabbi nonetheless. I never knew.

There's a lot we don't know; a lot we've been given and that we still don't know what to do with. But we know the basics. And we know enough to show up here

tonight, and we know we've got the right date. And we've got a healthy swath of our people, our family; our tribe. And a pretty clear sense of our spiritual and ethical principles. Our Jewishness AND our Judaism.

I think – I know - we can make this into something beautiful and meaningful to pass on to *our* great-grandchildren. Our bones and our tablets. Our mishpacha, and our precious Torah.