



April 25, 2010

Sermon by Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan

The Jewish Renewal Movement

Thank you all for welcoming me here today, and for letting me share in your music and prayer. Thank you to the ministers and sabbatical planning team for working collaboratively with me. The team asked me to speak about the branch of Judaism with which I'm involved, the Jewish Renewal Movement.

The Jewish Renewal movement is about fifty years old. Our umbrella organization is called the "ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal" and it includes forty affiliated synagogues, in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and, of course, Israel. We have a seminary, a retreat center, a rabbinic association, a publishing project and more. When people ask me to summarize the Jewish Renewal movement in one sentence, I usually say, "liberal Judaism with an emphasis on spirituality." And, with the help of today's scriptural readings, I would like to expand on that one sentence about Jewish Renewal, and talk about our emphasis on spirituality, our commitment to gender equality, and our interfaith and environmental philosophy.

In many ways, all of Judaism today is a renewed Judaism. We are only sixty-five years past the end of World War II, only sixty-five years past the murder of six million European Jews, only sixty-five years past the destruction of a huge cultural infrastructure: Jewish schools, libraries, printing presses, synagogues, social centers, towns and neighborhoods where parents passed on traditions to their children simply by practicing them together. After the holocaust, it took several decades just for survivors to come back from the brink: to count their losses, to find their way, as many did, to the newly established state of Israel, to North America and South America, and to build new lives in alien cultures. The re-establishment of our cultural institutions has fallen largely to our generation. Many of my age-peers (I'm in my fifties) have been asking, "How does one practice Judaism? How do I reconnect with my historical traditions?"

Two divergent answers have been given, leading to two very different paths. Some religious leaders have said, "Here are the guidelines. Follow this checklist of holidays, prayers, foods, clothing, and more." Many people find it reassuring to have a clear set of guidelines; they buy the guidebooks and they follow them. This is the more popular path. Jewish Orthodoxy is on the rise. In its more extreme forms, we call it Jewish fundamentalism. Jewish fundamentalism is not the same as Christian fundamentalism, which champions a

literal reading of the Bible. No Jews are Biblical literalists. Many of the rituals cherished by Jewish fundamentalists are based on symbolic or metaphorical readings of the Bible, and many ethical practices are based on discerning the principles implied in the Bible. Even so, many Jews are sticklers for these practices. Some religious leaders give a different answer to the question, “How does one practice Judaism?” They say, “Awaken your spirit! Ask your questions, share your yearnings, and find out how traditional teachings and practices can speak to your deepest needs.” This is the more difficult path of the two. Not every person who is shut down in response to trauma, even trauma carried across a generation or two, can open to their spiritual questions. Yet we know that when a person is ready, this opening is a gateway to healing. This second path is the approach of the Jewish Renewal movement.

The story of the Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4:18-36) tells the story of this approach in a symbolic way. Jewish principles of Biblical interpretation formulated 1500 years ago teach that Biblical stories are not just accounts of miraculous events from the past. They also hint at challenges our people will face in the future, and they offer inspirational assurances that God will be with us in those trials, just as God was with us in the past. So hear the story in a new way.

Late in life, after she had given up hope of passing on her legacy, and renewing her life through parental love, the Shunamite woman gave birth to her son. But one day he fell ill, and his vital signs were so low that he appeared to be dead. “Saddle up the donkey!” she said, “I’m going to see the holy man!” “Why?” said her husband. “We have no ritual obligations today.” But the woman left and came back with the prophet Elisha, who repeatedly performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the boy, until he was revived.

The boy represents the Jewish people in recent history. Though the remnant of the Jewish people did remain alive, our vital signs were low. Some of us, like the husband, said, “Just fulfill your ritual obligations!” But some of us, like the woman, expected something deeper. And our teachers, like the prophet Elisha, have worked with people one on one, bit by bit, to facilitate a spiritual revival. The work includes spiritual counseling, facilitating creative arts, exploring the psycho-spiritual ideas expressed in ancient rituals, creating inclusive communities, and more.

In creating inclusive communities, the Jewish Renewal movement has insisted on gender-equality. You may know that traditional Judaism is male-dominated and that women rabbis are a recent innovation. On one level, commitment to gender equality is an expression of our liberal politics. But it's also a fulfillment of a 1500-year old Jewish teaching about the feminine. We call God's feminine aspect "Shechinah," literally meaning: the female indwelling presence. Shechinah is like the ideal mother, who secretly supports us, quietly noticing when we stumble, and offering just the right material and emotional support. Jewish tradition says that when our people go into exile, Shechinah goes with us. Though her light may seem hidden, she is there. Now that we are returning from spiritual exile, Shechinah is emerging. One tangible expression of this is gender equality in liberal Judaism. We are reviving the teachings of ancient female sages, ordaining women rabbis, and ending gender segregation in houses of worship.

The story of Dorcas-Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43) is a New Testament story. But I believe it has a lot to say to contemporary Jews about gender balance. According to another ancient principle of Jewish Biblical interpretation, names of characters and places are symbolic. Of course each story tells about specific characters living in a specific place. But it also tells a story about the ideas expressed in the names of the characters and the places.

Dorcas, a spiritually developed disciple, lives in the town of Joppa. She dies, and her friends, who are single women, dress in the garments she made for them, and cry. Peter, whose name used to be Simon, revives her. Peter then goes to spend some time with a man named Simon.

The name of the town Joppa is pronounced in Hebrew "Yafa," and it means "beautiful woman." The name Dorcas means "gazelle," which is a traditional Jewish symbol for Shechinah. The name Simon means "listener."

Here is the story told on the level of ideas. Shechinah, the feminine presence of God, lives among beautiful women. When she withers away, women alone, who have received so much from her, lament her loss. She is revived through deep listening. The listener experiences a return to self. That is our hope in Jewish Renewal: that with equal participation of men and women, and openness to a range of gender expressions, our community can find its whole self, and explore the full range of human spiritual expressions.

Although Jews are working on so many fronts to solidify our spiritual renewal, we know that we are still a fragile people. So we debate among ourselves whether it is wiser simply to protect ourselves or to join with the larger world to work for peace, justice, and economic equality. The Jewish Renewal movement is a universalistic movement – we believe that the path to a healed world is through interfaith learning and cooperation. We also believe that one of our most important shared projects is the protection of Planet Earth and all its creatures. We know well what the 23rd Psalm means when it says that the grassy fields and the still waters feed our souls. And we know that if we join hands, no matter how diverse our spiritual traditions may be, we can walk together through the valley of the shadow of death, and sit together at a table of abundance in this beautiful world that is the house of God.

Thank you for letting me sit with you this morning.