

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Let My People Learn”
Exodus 19: 1-8; Acts 2: 1-36
June 4, 2017

Abigail Pogrebin is an author and former *60 Minutes* producer. She is also Jewish. Abby grew up in a family that observed some basic Jewish holiday rituals, but as an adult, she realized how little she knew about the origins and current relevance of the Jewish calendar in its entirety. So she embarked on an entire year of observing every single Jewish fast and festival. It was a year filled with

51 rabbis

6 days of fasting

Countless prayers

One day without deodorant

Quite a bit of alcohol

Untold amounts of revelation, joy, with, of course, a little bit of guilt mixed in! (1)

I have learned a lot and smiled a lot and laughed out loud on occasion and shed a tear or two as I have read Abby Pogrebin’s *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*.

And when it comes to Pentecost, Abby’s chapter on the Jewish celebration of Pentecost or Shavuot has helped me to make sense and meaning of our Christian experience of Pentecost in a way that I need to hear.

Shavuot means “weeks.” It celebrates the completion of the five weeks between Passover and Pentecost. It was originally a harvest festival, but after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, deeper meaning was attached to the festival observance. It became the festival marking the occasion of God giving the Torah to the Israelites on Mount Sinai.

Abigail Pogrebin writes, “I didn’t grow up understanding how huge this Torah-giving moment was, how it marks, really, the beginning of Judaism. The Israelites were in a precarious state after decades of slavery in Egypt, and had barely escaped—with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit. They had survived in the desert with little food and water, trusting Moses without knowing for sure that he could be trusted. They came to the foot of Sinai, were supposed to wake up early to receive the Torah, and then they actually *overslept*. According to rabbinic commentary, Moses had to wake up the people, which is why observant Jews now mark Shavuot by staying up all night—to make sure that they are up first thing in the morning.” (2)

Shavuot is observed over the course of two days. On the first day, Jews go to synagogue to hear the Ten Commandments read. The main event, however, is the learning binge which takes place the

night before. It's the thing to do on the eve of receiving the Torah: stay up all night studying it. Celebrating it. (3)

(Abby's observance was at the JCC in Manhattan where she took part in their jam-packed 10 p.m.-5 a.m. smorgasbord of programming. There were 75 sessions in all in categories like Text Study, the State of Israel, Social Justice, Jewish Spirituality, Arts, Cooking, Dance, Wellness, topped off with a concert on the roof at 4:15 a.m. It sounds crazy, but I love the idea, and it occurs to me that it might be a very cool thing to broach the idea with Davidson Learns and Temple Kol Tikvah and the Christian houses of faith and the Muslim student association and propose pulling a similar interfaith all-nighter for the whole community. Well, maybe not an actual *all-night* all-nighter, but a late night mini version...something like we do the night before Easter when we do a condensed version of the Great Vigil of Easter.

But back to the Pentecost story in Acts...

In the New Testament story from Acts, we read that all these pilgrims from all parts of the known world had converged on Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot. They had stayed up all night! They had stayed up all night studying Torah!

The text doesn't say it directly, but maybe we can assume that indeed they were Sleepless on Shavuot. And you know what it's like when you have been at an all-night youth lock-in! And you haven't dozed off during the carefully chosen PG-13 movie, not even for one second!

What happens when we are sleep-deprived is that our defenses are down. We're more vulnerable. And isn't it also true that it is sometimes when we are in a raw, vulnerable, undefended state that we are most able really to receive something wondrous. (4)

I think about what it was like to be the parent of a newborn. Talk about sleep-deprived. Talk about feeling raw and vulnerable. Talk about asking the question over and over again: What was God thinking in choosing me to be a parent????!! And yet, when you think that you can't keep your eyes open one second longer, you look down into that precious face and you think, What a miracle! What a miracle this new little life is, and the even bigger miracle is that I get to be a part of it!

The text that we have read from Acts doesn't mention a thing about the people in Jerusalem being Sleepless on Shavuot, but it makes a lot of sense to me. The drama. The being able to see and to hear. The accusation that they were drunk at 9 a.m. in the morning.

And all this has made me think about where lots of people are finding themselves these days. We are feeling vulnerable. Raw. Defenseless.

And when we're feeling raw, vulnerable, defenseless, things can go in any number of directions in our lives, I suppose, but there are at least two directions that occur to me.

One way is to give in to our fears. One way is to put our best efforts into building walls, battening down the hatches, strengthening our defenses, refusing to confess how vulnerable and afraid we are feeling deep down inside.

Another way is to go back to the old, old stories that we read in Scripture and to mine them with the expectation that the Holy Spirit, God who is light and air and freedom, will take those ancient stories and attach them to the lives that we are leading today and something wondrous will happen.

In an op-ed piece published earlier this week, the columnist David Brooks wrote, “people are wired to cooperate. Far from being a flimsy thing, the desire for cooperation is the primary human evolutionary advantage we have over the other animals.

People have a moral sense. They have a set of universal intuitions that help establish harmony between peoples. From their first moments, children are wired to feel each other’s pain. You don’t have to teach a child about what fairness is; they already know. There’s no society on earth where people are admired for running away in battle or for lying to their friends.

People have moral emotions. They feel rage at injustice, disgust toward greed, reverence for excellence, awe before the sacred and elevation in the face of goodness.

People yearn for righteousness. They want to feel meaning and purpose in their lives, that their lives are oriented toward the good.” (5)

We are wired for cooperation. We are wired for community. We are wired for community and for cooperation by God. We are wired for good.

This is the thread that stretches through the large biblical story from beginning to end. The thread stretches from Genesis 1 through the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai to the Pentecost events described in Acts.

In Genesis 1, the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, we read “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them...and indeed, it was very good.” A yearning, a capacity, for cooperation and community are imprinted into us by God.

Yes, it is true, in Genesis 4, we read the story of Cain and Abel, but it is clear that the competition and selfishness and ego and greed, the severing of relationship, the erosion of trust...all of this that is embodied in the story of Cain and Abel is a marring of and a departure from the cooperation and community that God has hardwired into humanity.

Regarding the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, a portion of which comprised today’s Old Testament lesson from Exodus, Rabbi Ayelet Cohen commented to Abigail Pogrebin about the Shavuot gathering at the Manhattan JCC, “In some ways it feels like a reenactment of everybody gathered at Sinai, the Jewish people in all their complexity and diversity in one place getting ready to have this experience together.” (6)

And in the Pentecost story in Acts, a thread which we pick up today as we celebrate the learning of third graders and of high school graduates and both the mission and the learning which will take place this summer at Montreat and at Massanetta and in Scotland and in Nicaragua and in Kenya, who among us could not say that the Holy Spirit is doing a powerful, wondrous thing right here among us at Davidson College Presbyterian Church, enabling us to act out community and cooperation that has been wired into us by our Creator and making our stand as witnesses to Christ and Christ’s vision for the world against nastiness and hatred and bullying.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I confess to you that sometimes I am sorely tempted to cynicism, to give up on the notion that goodness and community and cooperation will ever find a home in a world where violence and tragedy often seem to be claiming the winning trophy in the battle for our souls.

But then, I am heartened once again when I read about what happened on a commuter train in Portland, Oregon, a few days ago...

A white man with the horribly ironic last name of Christian who was riding on that train began screaming anti-Muslim insults at a black 16-year-old girl and her 17-year-old Muslim friend wearing a hijab. One can imagine people pretending not to hear and staring fiercely down at their phones; instead, three brave passengers stepped forward to protect the girls.

The three were as different as could be. One was a 23-year-old recent Reed College graduate who had a mane of long hair and was working as a consultant. Another was a 53-year-old Army veteran with the trimmest of haircuts and a record of service in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third was a 21-year-old poet and Portland State University student on his way to a job at a pizzeria. What united the three was decency.

When they intervened, the man harassing the girls pulled a knife and slashed the three men before fleeing. Rick Best, the veteran, died at the scene. Taliesin Namkai-Meche, the recent Reed graduate, was conscious as he waited for an ambulance. A good Samaritan took off her shirt to cover him; she recounted that some of his last words were: "I want everybody on the train to know, I love them." He died soon after arriving at the hospital.

The third man, Micah Fletcher, was injured, underwent surgery, and was released from the hospital last week.

After coming out of surgery, Micah Fletcher wrote a poem which reads in part,
*I, am alive
I spat in the eye of hate and lived.
This is what we must do for one another
We must live for one another. (7)*

On this Pentecost Sunday 2017 when we celebrate our various journeys, may we recommit to living for one another.

1. A. J. Jacobs, Forward in Abigail Pogrebin, *My Jewish Year: 18 Holiday, One Wondering Jew* (Bedford, NY: Fig Tree Books, 2017), vii.
2. Pogrebin, 251.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 254-255.
5. David Brooks, "The Axis of Selfishness," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2017.
6. Pogrebin, 253.
7. Nicholas Kristof, "Spitting In the Eye of Hatred," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2017.