

The Fishermen of Israel

By
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"Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that it shall no more be said, The LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, The LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them: and I will bring them again into their land that I gave unto their fathers. Behold, I will send for many fishermen, saith the LORD, and they shall fish them; and after will I send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks." Jeremiah 16:14-16

The concept of fishermen, referring to men and women who will seek out the lost remnant of our people and bring them back to their true God, should be as important to us as the concept of the messiah. In fact, given the state of our society, the fishermen may be more desperately needed. Moreover, as I will explain in this essay there is the theological belief that our acts of loving kindness (kessed) are necessary to usher in the messianic age. What greater act of love can we perform that would be higher than leading a lost brother or sister to Torah and restoring in him the knowledge of himself and his God?

The prophet Jeremiah was the first to use the metaphor of "fishermen" and "hunters" to describe the process of gathering our people. The Torah describes this ingathering with the Hebrew word "Shuvah," which mean return. Jeremiah lived after the Assyrian Exile of 722 B.C. when ten of the tribes of Israel were carried into captivity and he witnessed the Babylonian Exile of 586 B.C. He is often called the "weeping prophet" and is thought to be the principal author of the books of Kings, Lamentation, and, of course, Jeremiah. In his voice one hears the pain of one who has seen his people cut off from their God and their heritage. One also hears in Jeremiah a foreboding that things could still get a lot worst. At least the tribe of Judah and his tribe of Benyamin had been spared this destruction. Although the kingdom of Israel had been decimated, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem still stood, the priests offered up daily prayers and sacrifices, and Israelite kings still sat on the throne of David. As long as these things still remained, there was hope that our people could rebuild; there was the possibility that what had been lost could be restored--if fishermen would go out and bring our people back.

Today we seem less optimistic. Perhaps this is because in the centuries that followed the devastation of our people continued just as Jeremiah feared. In 70 A.D. the Romans burned King Solomon's Temple to the ground and sent the survivors into another exile, this one lasting for over two thousand years. With each dispersal our people have been scattered to all the diasporas of the world. As a result, the descendants of our people are to be found on every continent of the earth and, as Isaiah says, "the islands of the see."¹

¹ Isaiah 11:11 "In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea."

If this is so, as people of faith must believe, then who is searching for our people from among the tribes of Africa? Is Africa not the place of our first captivity? Were not Moses and his Ethiopian wife, Zipporah, born there? Were not Aaron and the high priests, Joshua, Miriam, and all those who left Egypt born in Africa? Was Joseph not also a prince of Egypt who married an Egyptian woman like many of his descendants for over four hundred years? The Torah says that we so resembled these African people in appearance that an Egyptian could not distinguish Moses from an actual son of Pharaoh. If all this is true, well documented in scripture, and therefore well known by biblical scholars, then why is there such doubt, suspicion, and incredulity when people of African descent seek to reclaim their ancestral heritage?

It is hard to be found when no one is looking for you. Chief Rabbi Matthew and Rabbi Arnold J. Ford were the first rabbis, the first fishermen, to look for us among the descents of those who survived our most recent bondage and exile known as the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This was the largest forced migration in human history. It mixed and transported over twelve million people from various parts of Africa to numerous destinations in the Western Hemisphere. The question is not, were Jews among these slaves? The real question is how could such an event take place and the hand of God not be in it? From our perspective what is ludicrous is to believe that this dispersal took place for over four hundred years and that none of the slaves were Jews.

Jeremiah gave us the answer. “And when your people say, 'Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?' you shall say to them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.’”² This is our history. Our people had been reading the Bible for centuries when suddenly God opened their eyes enough to see that these prophecies are about us. Serving foreign gods and foreign people is part of the proof that we are the people who the prophets foretold. Those who lack this criteria could not make our claim.

Our fishermen are looking for people who don't know that they are lost. They are using a bait, the Torah, that most people believe is a food that does not belong to them. The prophet predicted this. He said, “because they called thee an Outcast, saying, This is Zion, whom no man seeketh after.”³ No one was looking for us in the ghettos of America, in the villages of Africa, or among the poor of the Caribbean. Where are our fishermen today? More people know the truth now than did a century ago. Being a Black Jew isn't as odd or unthinkable as it was a few generations ago. Yet, the number of fishermen have not increased. Sadly, many who know in their hearts that they are Israelites do not fish at all. Few young people fish. I know Black rabbis who study but who don't fish. Therefore, like Jeremiah I lift my voice to the heavens and ask God, “Please LORD, send us fishermen.”

The art of fishing is not difficult. You do not need the knowledge of a rabbi to be a good fishermen. If all you know is the Sabbath day, that could be enough to brake the chains of someone who does not know the day that God blessed above all days, that God sanctified and rested on the seventh day. If you know the difference between Kosher and unclean food, that could be enough to remove the blindfold from those who eat pork with one hand and read the

² Jeremiah 5:4

³ Jeremiah 30:17

Bible with the other. Most importantly, you do not need a platform, an invitation, or an audience. Teach what you know to those you know. Fish where you are: in your home, to your friends, to strangers who thirst for the knowledge you take for granted.

That man who you see today staring at a television or even sitting disconsolately on a bar stool and looking into a class of bear for salvation, may one day be your teacher, your rabbi...he may even be the messiah waiting for you to fish him out of a sea of troubles. Though it may seem hard to believe, that lost soul in a dark body may be transformed by a fisherman who brings him to the tree of knowledge with love and persistence. After that man has been washed clean of ignorance, purged of idolatrous beliefs; when his head has been anointed with oil, his heart touched by the spirit of the Lord, and his mind filled with knowledge and wisdom then you may one day call him "my rabbi."⁴ At every circumcision we place a seat for the spirit of Elijah to be present. We say that when each child is born into our community that he may be the messiah. Perhaps the messiah has already been born; maybe he is already here? Maybe he is that lost soul waiting for you to find him?

This is not some fantastic dream nor is it a hypothetical possibility. It has happened many times in our recent past. Our great founder, Chief Rabbi W.A. Matthew, stood on a ladder on the streets of Harlem fishing for his people among a sea of black faces shouting, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."⁵ He caught them one at a time and taught them the difference between the oneness and a trinity. Many of them in turn become fishermen and hunters. They were real people of blessed memory like Brother Gavriel Manottt, Brother Joe Thomas, and Sister Marjorie Harris. Brother Manottt fished my father from the tracks of the Long Island Railroad, where they were both employed. He brought him to Rabbi Matthew at Commandment Keepers Congregation in the 1950s when it was located above a drug store in Harlem. Yet, my father recalled that after joining he understood how Balaam felt when he exclaimed, "The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open: "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwelling places, O Israel!"⁶ Many years later that man, my father would become Rabbi Levi Ben Levy; he would go on to found two thriving congregations (Beth Shalom and Beth Elohim) and Brother Manottt became a member of these congregation and called the young man he discovered "my rabbi."

Similarly, Brother Joe Thomas who worked across the river in the public schools of Newark, New Jersey, invited a promising young man from his Masonic lodge to Commandment Keepers. That young man would eventually become Rabbi Chaim White and go on to lead the congregation in the years after Rabbi Matthew's death. Finally, so that we can see that in the restoration of our people women can fish and hunt as well as men, let us remember the great works of Mother Marjorie Harris. She was a great fisherman. There were many Passovers where

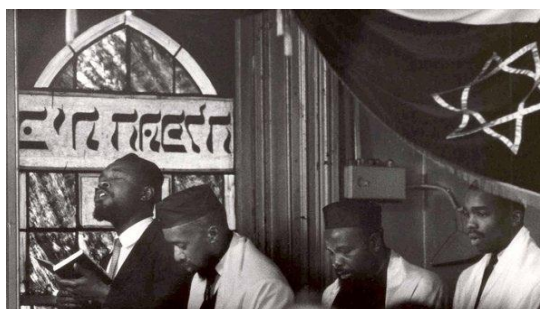
⁴ The Talmud says in the *Ethic of the Fathers* "Provide theyself a teacher." This can be understood in two ways: the first and most obvious is to find a school or synagogue where you can learn. The second interpretation is that you must make the conditions possible for you to have a teacher; that requires finding, training, and supporting the teachers and schools in your community. We have always and sometimes ironically found our teachers as I have shown in the examples above. The person you save today may someday save us all. Therefore, we should look as these "lost souls" as potential saviors.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁶ Numbers 24:3-5

she would arrive at our Seder with a group of people she had rounded up in her travels. It was as though she were dropping them off, throwing the fish into the boat as it were, because we might not see her again until Shavuot. However, those she brought to our services became some of our most loyal and dedicated members. In each of these cases, the fishermen I described understood that it was their mission and duty in life to bring those in darkness into the light of Torah. They went about their mission the way a person who has escaped from a burning house might rush back in to save someone he loved. We must love our people enough to "go back for them." Perhaps Hashem brought us out first so that we could go back into Egypt and say "Let my people go!"

You have all heard the African proverb that says, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach the man to fish and he will never go hungry." Well, Israel, we are at a point where we must fish or die. Our people are in the water up to their necks. Fish them out!



Fishermen: L-R, Joe Thomas, Rabbi Yahanatan, Rabbi Yatzeal
Commandment Keepers, Harlem, NY c. 1955