

King Solomon had traveled to every place on the face of the earth. One day he was boasting to his most trusted advisor, Bennyahu: "My magic carpet has taken me across the greatest oceans, to the tops of the highest mountains, and through the driest deserts. Yes, my dear Bennyahu, there is no place in the world that I have not seen."

At that moment, the king heard a strange voice, and a visitor appeared from nowhere and stood before the king. "But Solomon," the voice said, "have you been to the land that is underground?" Solomon knew the visitor at once; it was none other than Ashmodai, king of the demons. Many years before, Solomon had captured Ashmodai, who later had tricked the king into giving up his magic ring. And before Solomon had been able to get it back, he had been forced to wander as a beggar for many years while Ashmodai ruled in his place. Now the king of demons could not bear to hear Solomon's boasting. "Have you been to the underground world?" he asked again.

"Underground?" the king wondered. "Bennyahu, you have traveled to all corners of the earth to do my bidding. Have you ever seen such a place?" My king, I did hear talk of such a place, but in all my travels I have never come across it." So King Solomon laughed at the demon king, "An underground world? A ridiculous notion! If there is such a place, prove it to me. Bring me one of its inhabitants!"

Ashmodai answered, "Indeed, Solomon, if it's proof you want, just watch!" Then the demon king reached his hand into the ground and stretched and stretched and stretched until his hand reached a place in the depths of the earth and from that place he pulled forth a creature that seemed human in every way except that it had two heads and four eyes. Solomon gasped in amazement. "I never thought such a being could exist," he cried. "This is truly astonishing." The demon king said, "There is nothing new on the face of the earth, but this man has never been seen on the face of the earth. He is from Tevel." Then Ashmodai bowed and took his leave, while the two-headed man stayed behind.

When the creature saw that he had not been forced to return to the world underground, he sighed with relief and said, "Oh, thank God I am out of that place!" "And what place is that?" asked Solomon in amazement. "Who are you and where do you come from?" "I am a descendant of Cain, and I come from a land called Tevel that is far beneath the earth." "And what kind of place is it? Do you have a sun and a moon in your land?" asked Bennyahu, who was as astonished as the king. "Yes, and we farm and plow just as you do." "And do you pray?" asked the king. "Oh, yes," replied the man from Tevel. "We thank the Lord for creating us and all other living creatures. And I thank you, as well, for setting me free from that awful place."

Solomon was puzzled. "And why is that?" he asked. "Ah," replied the creature, with a greater sigh than before, "you have no idea what it's like to live in a land where everyone has two heads. There is no peace. Whenever someone's head says, 'Let's go in this direction,' the other answers, 'No, let's go the other way.' And they begin to argue. When the two heads are finished with a meal, one head yells, 'You ate more than I did.' 'No,' cries the second, 'you ate more!' All day long there is so much noise I can hardly bear it." And the creature's second head nodded in agreement.

Then the creature fell before the king and begged not to be sent back to his underground home. King Solomon agreed to let the strange visitor from Tevel remain in his kingdom, and even saw to it that he was married to a human wife. The husband worked hard farming the land, and he became very rich. In time the couple had six sons who resembled their mother and had only one head, and a seventh son who had two heads like his father.

At last the man from Tevel grew old and died, and the son who resembled him demanded two portions of his inheritance. "After all," he said, "I have twice as many heads as my brothers, so it is only fair that I receive twice as much as they." But his brothers disagreed. "You have only one body," they argued. "Therefore, you should receive only one portion." The sons continued to argue and could not come to an agreement. And so, at last, they went to King Solomon to ask him to decide the matter.

King Solomon asked for boiling water to be brought to him. He then commanded one of his servants to pour the hot water over one of the man's heads, but just as the servant was about to do so, both heads began to scream at the same time, "No, no, don't burn me!" King Solomon stopped the servant with his outstretched hand and said, "You see, both heads are afraid. That proves that they are one."

So it was that the two-headed son received only a single portion of his father's inheritance, and never again did he claim that he deserved twice as much as anyone else. So too, did King Solomon continue to reign over his people and to judge them wisely for many years.

This story comes from the midrash. It serves as an allegory about people's inability to agree with each other and teaches us that we must cooperate with each other in order to achieve our goals. I would like to explore this idea further in light of the transdenominational nature of Mt. Sinai Congregation.

The members of our Jewish community come from many backgrounds: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, exploring, and probably a few I haven't mentioned. Each tradition is near and dear to the one who holds those beliefs. Yet in Cheyenne, we are one community: an outpost of Jews on the frontier who need each other in order to keep Judaism alive here. The interweaving of different traditions is what makes our synagogue transdenominational. How does that work though, if you have been Conservative all your life and someone else in the congregation wants to play guitar for services on Friday night? Or how about if you identify as Reform and someone suggests that the musaf service should be davenned in its entirety every week? The service cannot only be about one person's experience; it must be about everyone's experience. The goal then becomes how to expand each one's definition of a service to be inclusive of practices that are not as familiar or comfortable, rather than rejecting practices, or worse, rejecting people who do not fit with one's own comfort zone.

Transdenominationalism is not a judgment of other Jews and of other movements. It is in fact the opposite. It represents inclusiveness for all Jews who can enter into God's house and be welcomed and legitimate in all of their approaches. The differences will not and should not disappear into a single approach to Judaism. That would be stifling of creativity and responsiveness to the changing realities of our lives. What does need to disappear is the separateness, rejection and hostility that exist among different Jews. When we study together, pray together, socialize together, work on projects together, then we can come to appreciate the differences and the strengths we each possess.

Judaism was always intended to be a responsive religion, adapting to the changing needs of new generations. No where is this more evident than when the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Up until that fateful event, the Jewish people worshipped through sacrifice at a central location in Jerusalem. The rabbis were faced with a choice of epic proportions: adapt or succumb and submit to the extinction of the religion. The Temple was carried on as an idea into the thousands of synagogues we now have all over the world, and the sacrifices were transformed into thrice-daily prayer services. When Jewish people dismiss the creative responsiveness that is built into our religion, then Judaism becomes rigid and brittle. How easy is it to hold on to a label like a banner and then have that label become a box and then have that box become a fortress from which it is all too easy to throw stones at one another and from which it is impossible to entertain new ideas. The Holy One who brought us together at Sinai must be weeping alone at the top of that mountain. How God must cry at seeing the way the words of Torah are used to denounce, castigate and reject other Jews.

It is the inclusivity of opinion that is the hallmark of the development of Jewish thought. Take a look at the Talmud. The rabbis never edited out any of their discussions – not even the ones with which they disagreed. For them, it was both the individual and group thought process that led to the revelation of truth that has become the Oral Law. They were committed to not just the words of God but also to the critical thinking that went into their interpretation. Every approach to Torah creates another doorway through which the light of Torah is revealed. All of these approaches together are part of a greater truth. A transdenominational approach to text, like a transdenominational approach to the fabric of Jewish life at Mt. Sinai, is one which unites us with a common purpose but with diversity of thought and action that make it possible to reveal more of the doorways into Torah so that her truth may shine her light on us.

The congregation will not wither away if we pick a new *siddur* and some people have a hard time adjusting to it. The same prayers are in every *siddur*. Nor will the congregation languish if we continue to celebrate two days of holidays instead of one even though we no longer rely on the sighting of the new moon to tell us when the holiday starts. What has the potential to destroy the congregation is lack of respect for one another, the bad-mouthing that goes with it, and the refusal to participate in activities because they are not done in the manner to which we are accustomed or because of who else is in attendance.

There is extraordinary value in diversity. That is what makes this congregation strong. This synagogue belongs to all of us, not just to those who come to services or those who provide the delicious food. We are responsible to each other to maintain this community and to make it grow. Each one must take part, regardless of what that part is. No one can run the synagogue single handedly. We need everyone's participation to make it thrive. I'd like to suggest that one of the resolutions you make this year is to put aside any grudges you may have held about the synagogue and get involved. Your voice and your energy are important – each one of you, not just the few who carry the ball for the rest of us. Just like it takes a village to raise a family, it takes the whole community to make Mt. Sinai a thriving place for Jewish worship and culture in Cheyenne.

Our differences are not our downfall, they are our strength. We need our founding families to carry on time-honored traditions and to preserve our history. We need new people with fresh and innovative ideas to be responsive to the changing

requirements of the community. Two heads really are better than one. Our two-headed man in the story cannot cut himself off from his other head any more than we can cut ourselves off from each other. Let us work together in the coming year to strengthen Mt. Sinai and let it be a beacon of light where the truth of Torah is revealed. *Shanah tovah.*