Passover dvar

Exodus XXXIII, 12-14 moses says to god, you say to me, bring up this people, and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me.

Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name and thou hast also found grace in my sight

So…if I have found grace in thy sight, show me now thy ways **that I may know thee**, to the end that I may find grace in thy sight and consider **that this nation is thy people**.

15 [God says, I will go with you

16Moses says, if you won’t go with us, don’t carry us up there.]

How shall it be known that I have found grace in thy sight, I and thy people? Isn’t it the fact that thou goest with us, so that we are distinguished, I and thy people, from all the people that are on the face of the earth?

This whole request and response are for us alone. Others can listen in, but it makes us uncomfortable. My father, who never went to temple except for the social obligations on high holidays, whispered to me that we were better than anyone else. I don’t know whether others here grew up believing that we were superior, but I assumed that all jews knew this, and that it was probably because of others hearing the news that they hated us. I went past a catholic school on my way to elementary public school in mt Vernon, and I remember kids calling us Christ killers—although maybe I just imagined it, same difference, I knew they said it somewhere. And it did frighten me.

We all knew what god meant when he said, distinguished from all the people that are on the face of the earth. It probably had to do with other things about being jewish, like knowing Hebrew, at least a bit; knowing what to do in services, at least a bit. Knowing that there were people who knew and trying to imitate them, anyway. It also had to do with being out there in the world, where there were others apart from us, and knowing what words like goy and shiksa meant. But more than that, it meant something about being special, apart from others, even when they were smart or got good grades. This notion of being better than others, it was there for the children, passed on from generation to generation along with everything that meant being jewish, even when we also learned contradictory things, like the fact that the Israelites rebelled against god or that god wanted to punish and kill all the Israelites. None of that, or the holocaust, could stop us from being special.

Even worse, being special became, probably when you were a teenager, this terrible thing about having to be a model for others, those who weren’t special. Something about carrying knowledge of god to others who didn’t know who god was. We knew, because in the next passage, moses says to god, show me who you are, and god complies, and we read about it, and moses had a sunburn to prove it.

Then we got older and went to college, and maybe forgot about being special, unless we were dating non-jews and our parents got uneasy about that, because, how could we pass on our specialness if the girl wasn’t jewish, and what would the kids consider themselves to be, and how could they be special if their mother wasn’t, even if she converted? And pretty soon, this whole discussion stopped being about being better than others, but mixed marriage and children, and would we ever really survive in this country that believed in the vast majority in santa claus when we couldn’t even have a Christmas tree, or if we did, then why would god go with us?

So we should ask what god’s going with us could ever have meant, and consider the one moment when it happened, in god’s own person, and not in a bush or a fire or a light or a thought, but in the immediacy of the divine.

Ex XXXIII, 21 behold there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand until I have passed by. And I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back, but my face shall not be seen.

Being jewish is now clear to me. It is there in that place; the cleft of the rock. If we are special, it is because we occupy the space which is a cleft in a rock. It is because, then, when we will have reached up, for the highest point, a hand will have to cover us. And then, as its glory passes by, the hand will be taken away.

My parents never spoke to me of that place, but if they had, I would have known it was located in the concentration camps, and I would say that that is still true. It would have been somehow surviving there because there was something that protected me long enough till the troops finally came and freed us. But that time there was a night, the night of all nights, the kristallnacht, the night of passing over, the night when death was taking everyone around me because that protective hand was taken away, and I was standing there naked, totally naked, disarmed, vulnerable to the death, shivering, standing still, outside of time, outside of that damn camp and the Nazis, holding my breath even, as its glory passed me by.

I was the lucky one. And had to live when all around me died, my friends, my father, my mother, my sister, my aunts my uncles my grandparents my children, my babies, my little grandchildren, all died. There was nothing left but the bones, the bones of the whole house of Israel. And I was lucky enough to live, to be a jew, to say, how lucky I was to be a jew, to say thank you.

There will never be such a thing as a jew except for those who will have known that night, and who must tell their children every year. Except it is too hard to tell, so we make up stories about *their* children, the egyptians’ first born, whose deaths were the price for letting us go, letting us step out of the cleft in the rock and go on down the mountain, burned with the knowledge that marks us forever. Let there be such a thing as a jew, to tell this story every year, god willing.

What are words of the story to tell? “Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun [god is most merciful, compassionate], erech apayim [slow to anger] v'rav chesed ve-emet [abounding in kindness and faithfulness], Please help me finish notzer chesed la-alafim, nosei avon va-feshah, v'chata-ah v'nakei. [forgiving sin to the thousandth generation]

This is my favorite prayer, the prayer we intone over and over at yom kippur, stopping just at that point of forgiveness, nakei, “clearing” in fox’s translation. For us today, celebrating Passover, this clearing stops then, and reiterates nakei but with lo, lo yinakei poker, not clearing the guilty, and punishing their children and children’s children. Their bones will rattle for three and four generations. Moses quickly bows down to the ground, and begs god to come down to his children, come down among us and forgive our sin, and “make us your inheritance.” And god agrees. Soon the cleft in the rock and the night of passing over are forgotten, and we go on.

I have nothing to add for myself to this story of Passover which is about passing on the story to the children, the story of what it means to be a jew. Everyone has their own story, and I fear mine is getting old as the holocaust becomes more distant. I want to stop by asking you, where do we go from here? What are we supposed to tell the children in answer to the question, why is this night so special, what are we jews, why are we so special, and if we are not really special, what does it mean to be a jew after all that we have gone through? On Passover, in my house, we would never talk about these things. But this is a KI dvar where these are the dry bones that we have brought back over and over. And we’re free to tell our own stories to each other. Gut yantif.