O F E Y E S A N D H E A R T S

Guest Kit Kat Essay — May 20, 2008
by
Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Having been away for five years, I am grateful that Artie remembered this long-lost Kit-Kater and even more grateful for the invitation to offer this concluding essay of the season.

During my time in Columbus, a highlight of each month was my evening at Kit Kat. Ever since moving to Kansas City, I have longed to discover a cadre of acquaintances as diverse and fascinating as those who gather each month here to enjoy good food, great conversation, and extraordinary essays. Two people were responsible for my introduction to Kit Kat, Tom Lurie and Chuck Lazarus. I am delighted that Tom and Nancy are here tonight and I thank him for encouraging me to become a part of Kit Kat.

As we all know, Chuck Lazarus is no longer with us. But Chuck was a major piece of my Kit Kat experience. He encouraged me to join. And it was my distinct joy to drive him to our monthly meetings. Those 15 minutes in the car each way were a most precious gift, as Chuck shared with me history and perspective and opinion over a wide range of subjects. Both as a past president of Temple Israel and as a fellow citizen of the world, he challenged me to be my best, to carefully consider all aspects of a problem, and not be afraid to extend myself into new arenas. To this day, I quote Chuck Lazarus often, recalling his wisdom and his wit. It is in this spirit that I dedicate tonight's essay to his memory.

On the way home after each of our monthly meetings, Chuck would invariably evaluate that evening's essay based on rule #22 of our Kit Kat traditions: "It is the custom that at each regular meeting a member present an essay on a topic other than those associated with his usual occupation. Essay titles are designed to suggest their content without disclosing the subject matter of the essay." If an essayist was successful, Chuck would ponder the topic. If he had drifted too close to his usual occupation, or did not conceal his topic enough, or did not cause members to – in the words of our president, Artie Isaac, "to leave with an implied assignment: pondering the truth that was laid bare by the speaker," then he would excoriate the member and would say, "Let's see if next month's is better."

Well, I wish Chuck were here tonight, so I could raise a glass of scotch to him, and ask – when finished – what he thought of my essay. In lieu of that, if something is gained from my words tonight, please credit Chuck Lazarus and his memory. The rest, the chaff, is solely my responsibility.

With that, let us begin…as we explore "Of Eyes and Hearts."

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I had no skills to offer at Mother Teresa's Mission for the Sick and Dying Destitutes in Addis Ababa, a refuge for Ethiopia's most desperate and dying. Doctors and dentists are in desperately short supply…but not much call for rabbis. Here was a compound filled with over 400 patients, the sickest and most hopeless of Addis Ababa, a city of four million. These are people even the beggars in the streets mock, those who are physically deformed, those with rare and debilitating diseases, who have found their way to this small oasis of hope,

run by the Catholic order, the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa.

As I stood there that first day, my insides roiled as I soaked up the scene. In front of me, a young man was lying on a stretcher. His left leg was unnaturally bent forward at the knee. His head had a huge gaping wound just above his right eye. He had been plowing a field with an ox, following along in a precarious balance between his one good and one deformed leg. He lost his balance, fell, and the ox had accidentally gored his owner above the eye. His cousins had traveled two days by donkey cart to Addis to bring him to Mother Teresa's for treatment. I turned away, not able to look at the man's open wound, covered with flies and dirt from his journey.

As I walked further into the clinic, three children, sitting on the stoop, just inside the entrance to the clinic, were a picture of pity. The first had only one leg, the other having been amputated above the knee because of cancer. The second had hydrocephalus, more commonly known as water on the brain. His head was abnormally large, with pockets of fluid distending the skull. And the third had tuberculosis of the spine. His back was twisted at a severe 40^{o} angle. Walking past them, I came face-to-face with a man, whose entire upper body was covered with white nodules, thousands of small white pustules. Everywhere I turned within Mother Teresa's, I confronted pain, suffering, and sadness.

But, then, again, there was hope. Nuns, health workers, and volunteers treated each who crossed their doorstep with dignity. If possible, they helped. If possible, they eased some of the fear and applied the balm of loving concern onto the open wounds of those who came to this last outpost of hope.

And so, there I was.

With bowed humility, I recognized that two dozen years of education, followed by another two dozen years of plying my trade offered me no tools, no skills to be of help in this place. I was as ill-equipped as the farmer whose head had been gored. I was just a person with free hands and – hopefully – with open eyes and an open heart.

And so, I spent my days volunteering at Mother Teresa's by shaving hair, cutting nails, and giving body massages. It took no skill. Just a willingness to touch those suffering…to touch them, physically and – as I soon discovered – to be touched emotionally.

One afternoon, I took nail clippers and walked around offering to trim finger and toe nails. One older gentleman nodded and I sat down next to him, me clad with latex gloves and protective white lab coat. He placed his hand in mine. I was shocked by what I saw. There were five fingers, but three were terribly misshapen. He insisted I cut the nails on all the fingers. I struggled, unable to get the trimmer to catch the odd-shaped nails. He looked up and saw that I was sweating with panic because of my own ineptitude. He placed his hand on mine, looked at me, and in Amharic said, "Slowly...slowly." I concentrated and got one nail cut...and the next...and the next. When I finished, I smiled at him. He smiled back...then he took my hand, started to pull off my glove, and gestured to let him cut my nails. His hands were covered with horrible-looking black and white fungus. What should I do? There was anticipation and love in his eyes. So...I took off my gloves and sat as an elderly Ethiopian trimmed my nails. When we finished, he reached into his small cloth bag of earthly possessions he carried with him and he pulled out a tin ring and placed it on my finger. I was speechless. With this gift, he reminded me that life

was meant to be shared, that what we wrap ourselves in – whether latex gloves or layers of psychological defenses – keeps us from being touched by others.

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Over the course of the last three years, I have spent about ten weeks traveling in Ethiopia, one of the most ancient of way stations along our human journey. Many have asked me why…why Ethiopia?

In this area of the world, Lucy and Salam were found…two of the oldest humanoid fossil sets ever discovered. There is no doubt that the Ethiopian region of Africa is the literal cradle of evolutionary development. What secrets does this primordial corner of the earth hold in understanding more about the human condition? How might I better serve my fellow human being by connecting with a place and a people, whose history reaches back to the dawn of humanity?

My quest for wisdom followed three distinct paths…first, to Mother Teresa's in Addis Ababa, second, to the Beta Yisrael and Falash Mura of Western Ethiopia; and finally, to the Hamer Tribe, in the South Omo region. In the end, all three converged into new understanding.

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There is a national myth that Ethiopians are descended from a union between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, from about 1000 BCE. In the Biblical book of I Kings, chapter 10, we learn that queen pays a royal visit to Jerusalem. There, King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all that she desired. The queen returned to Ethiopia, the land over which she ruled, pregnant, carrying the son of the great Solomon. She named him Menelik, meaning "how handsome he is." According to the Kibra Negast, an Ethiopian legend, when Menelik turned 13, he returned to Jerusalem for his father's blessing. In one

iteration of that legend, he wins the favor of his father and is invited to sit on the throne, next to Solomon but he longs to return home. Solomon gives him the sons of the High Priest to accompany him, along with great wealth…including the most precious of all possessions, the holy Ark of the Covenant. In another version, Solomon is jealous of his newly discovered son, and Menelik returns to Ethiopia under the cover of darkness, stealing the Ark, and accompanied by the sons of the High Priest, who serve as collaborators for this great theft. In either case, the tradition developed that Ethiopians a) possess the Ark of the Covenant; and b) their lineage is traced directly to Solomon.

Such a story helps in understanding the origins of the Jewish community in Ethiopia, a group of people called Beta Yisrael. Some claim they are the direct descendents of Menelik and his youthful accomplices; some believe they are part of the remnant of Jews who escaped the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE; some scholars maintain that they came via Yemen, sometime after the destruction of the second Temple, which occurred in 70 CE.

Regardless of their true genesis, one inescapable truth is that a Jewish community has resided in Ethiopia for at least eighteen hundred years…and perhaps as long as three thousand. They called themselves "Beta Yisrael," the House of Israel. Others saw them as outsiders, strangers, aliens, trespassers, and so called them "Falasha." The "golden age" of Ethiopian Jewry spanned long periods between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, where Jewish kings reigned over vast territories and estimates were recorded of up to half a million Jews living in the environs.

Their Judaism was very different than that found elsewhere in the world. Ethiopian Jews knew nothing about what is called Rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of the second Temple, in Jerusalem, in 70 CE. Rabbinic Judaism, which is followed today, is based on an oral legal code and attendant oral commentary, and preserved in a body of literature known as Talmud. The Beta Yisrael have no tradition about such Oral Law. All their traditions are pre-Rabbinic, prior to the Common Era. The liturgical language used was Ge'ez, not Hebrew; their religious leaders were called kessim, not rabbis; they celebrated holidays unknown to the rest of world Jewry.

This Jewish community in Ethiopia… a community that has existed for thousands of years…has, over the last twenty-five years, virtually disappeared. All the Beta Yisrael have left Ethiopia and gone to Israel…every single one…gone. As history has written their story, it has been a tale of rescue…of saving the Beta Yisrael from persecution, oppression, and suffering. In two daring operations, dubbed Operation Moses and Operation Solomon, separated by some 7 years, some 35,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel. In total, some 40,000 Jews have left Ethiopia. Subsequently, another 30,000 relatives – called Falash Mura, have also immigrated to Israel.

One afternoon, I was at the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa, as a group of about 150 Falash Mura men, women, and children prepared themselves for their life-altering journey. One young girl captivated me with her big round eyes and innocent beauty. I tried to engage her in conversation. My Amharic and her English were non-existent. Nonetheless, we communicated with our eyes and our smiles. We sat together on the ground, playing games in the dirt. As she rose

to leave, I stopped her, took a tin ring off my finger, and slipped it onto hers…my silent prayer that her journey be filled with generosity and humanity.

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Entering the Omo region of southern Ethiopia, my traveling companion – a neurosurgeon – and I asked our guide to keep us off the main path. We wanted to meet tribal families, to see how they lived, to experience their reality. Fortuitously, our guide had lived side-by-side with a Hamer tribal family for many months before becoming a full-time tourist guide. We drove there and he asked if two white men could live with them for a few days. We were welcomed as long-lost family.

Our hosts were 18 members of an extended family, all living in two circular huts made of tree branches for the walls and straw for the conical roof. There was no furniture. Goat skins served as sleeping mats. Gourds were used to eat food and drink coffee. Their few clay pots were made by hand.

Because we had no shared language, misunderstandings occurred. One morning, I was trying to learn more about their diet. One of the young women took me by the arm, led me to the nearby goat-pen. There she helped me milk a goat into a calabash gourd, and then insisted that I drink it…it was her way of serving a guest who had expressed hunger.

As we lived together over the next couple of days, I was moved by the harmony existing in their lives. I was privileged to witness what the theologian, Martin Buber, described as an I-Thou relationship…in this case, not with the Divine, but with their surrounding environs. They were defined by the land, just as the land provided for all their needs. This was especially evident when I was invited to a bull jumping ceremony. Yes, bull jumping.

This coming-of-age ceremony occurs only within the Hamer tribe. It is – if you will – the equivalent in Judaism of a young man becoming a Bar Mitzvah; or in Catholicism, the rite of Confirmation. It is a time when a thirteen-year-old boy transitions into adulthood. His task is daunting. He has to jump up on top of, and then run across the backs of 10 bulls. And he has to accomplish this three times. If he fails, he will not marry. He will not be allowed to work with other men. He will be an outcast in his society. If he succeeds, his name is changed, and he enters into the ranks of young adulthood, a hero in the eyes of family and friends. Why this as a test of manhood? Because the Hamer live off their livestock, they are literally dependent on the backs of their bulls…to plow the rugged land. To jump the bulls is to symbolically master them.

It is a three-day celebration, held uniquely for every thirteen-year-old boy. Hundreds of tribesmen travel up to 30 miles on foot to participate. The festivities begin around 11:00 am, as men and women separate for gender-specific activities. The women dance and sing, encouraging the young man in his upcoming test. The men adorn themselves with special mud, creating elaborate designs on their bodies and faces. Eventually, the young single women are whipped by those young men who have successfully jumped the bulls in the past, in a type of courting ritual, which is at once both repulsive and mesmerizing, the women demanding to be whipped until their backs bleed, the men feigning disinterest, causing the women to beg and plead even more. Some six hours later, the pinnacle event occurs, as the feted young man attempts to jump the bulls.

At first, we thought about passing up this invitation. Women being whipped until their skin breaks open and bleeds felt morally reprehensible. Yet, we were there to explore, to learn…and most importantly, to understand.

I am glad we went. The time we spent combined with my time at Mother Teresa's, my learning of the Beta Yisrael and the Falash Mura, and my living with the Hamer people provided me with a greater appreciation of shared human values albeit via distinctive cultural and social paths.

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There are those who look upon our Kit Kat Club as a social anomaly. We look at our group as a wonderful historical re-creation of that literary club from the eighteenth century of English writers, who challenged one another intellectually. Others ask how could responsible and intelligent communal leaders belong to any club that permits only males to join?

As a Jew, I recognize that one of the oldest and most enduring rituals of our tradition is "brit milah," circumcision of our male infants at eight days. Not only is cutting off the foreskin required, it is done in the midst of family and friends, and celebrated with a party. As a twenty-first century citizen of the world, the concept and the reality is understandably bizarre…and, some might legitimately say, barbaric.

In truth, whether we speak of Kit Kat or Jewish traditions, the way in which one inside a social system looks at reality is vastly different than one who views it with partial understanding from the outside.

Applying this same principle, my experiences have caused me to ask: should Western values be imposed – or perhaps even introduced – to a society that has endured and thrived essentially unchanged for hundreds – if not

thousands – of years? Who am I to say that female circumcision is barbaric and should be banned in Africa? Who am I to judge the moral correctness of body scarification or of polygamy or of determining social order by having those coming-of-age jump bulls?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines civilization as "a developed or advanced state of human society." It goes on to defines the verb "to civilize" as: "to bring out of a state of barbarism; to instruct in the arts of life; to enlighten; to refine and polish."

Such definitions are fraught with difficulties. Who are to be the arbiters of refinement and polish? Just because we do not understand…just because we have developed along a different path…is that to say our journey is somehow more noble, more "civilized" than another? Intellectually, we know the answer. Nonetheless, cultural elitism has wreaked havoc for millennia and in its wake lay strewn cultures and traditions now long forgotten. We are trading wat and injera, basic Ethiopian dietary staples, for Big Macs and fries. And in the process, all of us suffer.

As a counterpoint, I suggest there are shared truths that arise from the experiences I have shared tonight…truths that aid us in being better stewards of our common human condition.

These, then, are the three truths I discovered:

Truth #1: Riches are defined not by how much we possess, but by how much we share our possessions with others. Whether it is a tin ring as a gesture of gratitude or hope, the intimacy of a coming-of-age ceremony, or even goat's milk to quench perceived hunger, it is the sharing of one's life that brings meaning to our existence.

Truth #2: Traditions possess power. Discover the meaning. Don't dismiss it. I understand now why polygamy is practiced in this area of Africa. With life so tenuous and demanding, it takes many children to sustain a family. With a life expectancy of 48 years, the more people that are in a family, the greater the ability to survive. In a country where life can be so cruel, physical strength and agility is essential. Jumping of bulls is as meaningful for survival in Ethiopia as learning how to add and subtract is here in the United States.

Sadly, this truth is most strongly illuminated when it is trampled upon. The traditions of the Beta Yisrael and Falash Mura communities are dismissed in Israel, today, as inauthentic expressions of Judaism. Because of the cultural and social elitism of the rabbinical authorities within the country, they have been forced socially to abandon traditions going back hundreds and even thousands of years. In so doing, they have lost an important mooring of where they come from and for what they have stood.

Truth #3: Salvation comes in many forms. Keep your eyes and your heart open to discover opportunities to offer deliverance. Like the challenge facing a doctor who has a successful surgery but loses the patient, sometimes the help we should offer is not so easily determined. Mother Teresa's is primarily a hospice, a place of solace and love, not a hospital. When questioned why not exert every effort to prolong each life, the answer given was painful to hear. While life is precious, so too is the dignity of such a life. When circumstances prevent an individual from ever emerging into a sustainable independent existence, sometimes it is better to permit one to die.

This truth was made real when a woman approached a clinic associated with Mother Teresa's, with a tumor that filled half her face, and reached back

into her skull. She was, it turns out, Beta Yisrael, an Ethiopian Jew. The Israeli embassy immediately airlifted her to Israel, purchasing four plane seats: three for her to lie down upon and a fourth for an embassy representative, as a guardian companion. Upon arriving in Israel, she was taken by ambulance to Sha'arei Tzedek Hospital, where she died on the operating table. A noble gesture, to be sure. But was the salvation in trying to heal her? Or would it have been the kinder path to help her return to her village, surrounded by her children and grandchildren?

Finally, in much less dramatic fashion, deliverance appears in unexpected ways…when a young woman offers her guest goat-milk to drink; when a young man getting ready to jump the bulls is filled with fear, and a middle-aged white guy offers him a photo of the boy printed with a portable printer, telling him that he is looking at a man of strength and power…and the boy smiles and tucks the picture into his loincloth for good luck; and sometimes it is when an old man gives an unexpected gift to a volunteer by cutting his nails. Yes, salvation comes in many forms.

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Riches are defined by what we share with others.

Traditions contain great power. Embrace them.

Salvation appears in many guises. The secret is to keep ones eyes and heart open to the needs we perceive.

Such are the lessons I have learned on this journey. I can honestly say that it has transformed me in ways I never imagined at the beginning. I look at that in which I am involved – and appreciate in ways never before – the gifts such events and people offer. My eyes and my heart have been opened.

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I was standing in line to check-in at Ben Gurion Airport, in Tel Aviv, getting ready to return home from a trip to Israel. I felt a tug on my pant's leg. As I turned around, no one was there. I then looked down and saw her, a beautiful and bright child, about 8-years-old.

"Shalom, chaver," she said. Hello, my friend.

Thinking that this was the first time I had ever been begged at in the airport, I responded hesitantly, "Shalom." Hello.

"Ata zocheir oti?" she asked. Do you remember me?

Now confused, I looked at her and replied, "Ani mitzta-eir. Lo." I am sorry. I don't.

That's when she held up the tin ring on her finger.

I bent down to face her eye-to-eye. It was then I saw the same beautiful smile that captured me in the Israeli embassy compound.

"Ma chadash?" I asked. What's new?

"Ani Yehudi achshav. Ani Yisraeli." I am a Jew now. I am an Israeli.

"Todah lecha (thank you)," she said, as she held up her hand once more, showing me the ring.

"Lo, lo, todah lach," I replied. No, no…thank you. And with that, she ran off in the crowd to join family.

To this day, I do not know her name. And doubt that I will ever see her again. But my hope is that she will – someday – find the right person to give her ring to. In so doing, she will open her eyes and her heart to another. And she will complete her journey.

My travels have taught me we are of one human family. However, we should strive to be not as America defines herself – as a melting pot – but rather as our neighbor to the north self-identifies – as a mosaic. By focusing on the riches each of us individually possesses, available to share with others; by celebrating the unique traditions within families, tribes, cultures, nations (and even within Kit Kat); and by seeking ways to bring salvation to each we meet, we are like a bright and beautiful mosaic – each piece lending beauty to the greater human panorama.

And we achieve all this when we live our lives with open eyes and open hearts.