Learning Reverence from Little House on the Prairie and My Christian Colleagues

View PDF



Rebecca Dreisinger earned degrees in philosophy and religion, and counseling. She lives in Manhattan with her family, where she works as a school counselor in the New York City Public Schools. Her writing has appeared in various local, national, and international publications. This article appears in issue 31 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The camera pans across golden fields of plump wheat stalks so abundant they dwarf Michael Landon, in the guise of Charles Ingalls, American farmer extraordinaire. As Mr. Ingalls surveys the abundance before him, he reaches out to pluck a single robust stalk, spilling the wheat grains onto his open palm. Closing his fist over the treasure, he turns his eyes heavenward. "Thank you, Lord," he says plainly.

Those familiar with *Little House on the Prairie*, the television drama based on the historical account of a pioneer family's life in the late 1800s American West, know how rare it is for Mr. Ingalls to experience such a moment of *hodu l'Hashem ki tov*, thanks to God for the goodness in front of him. The life of the Ingalls family as pioneers on the American prairie was not filled with many moments of bountiful good. The television Ingalls notoriously faced hardship of every natural, financial, and social dimension in their small town of Walnut Grove, and although they gave thanks each morning and evening before meals, bounty such as this rarely came their way for long. In fact, in just a matter of moments would follow a hail storm that would wipe out this glorious crop, on the verge of its cash-out.

But let us linger for a moment with Charles in the midst of his golden plenty. Take in the way in which he so prosaically lifts his eyes to the heavens as though addressing a familiar friend, offering his thanks in a manner that is so rare and so moving in its simplicity. What we know from this scene is that Charles Ingalls walks with God. That is, he carries an awareness of his creator with him so closely, at all times, so that when events transpire in his life he is quickly able to put them in perspective vis-a-vis God, the source of all.

This is true for Mr. Ingalls, whether come good or bad. Some episodes after this harvest comes the most joyful birth of Charles' son, the first after three daughters, followed by the child's desperate failure to thrive and imminent demise, as his parents and doctors stand by helpless. When the child does slip away, Charles' immediate response is to embrace his wife and begin to recite: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," while blinking back tears. Instinctively, he extols God or leans on Him in times of duress, talks with him as though he were by his side at any moment.

I feel grateful to have grown up with Little House running in prime time. By the grace of cable television, I also have the satisfaction of introducing my own children to it and thus offering them a visual of what walking with God might look like. Family and friends who know of my intimate knowledge of this series joke that I hold as guides *Torat Moshe*, Moshe's teaching, the Torah, and *Torat Little House*, the teaching of *Little House*. As a mother and school counselor, I believe the show to be of outstanding quality in the sensitive and accurate treatment of social ills and the child's worldview, but also because at the base of it all lies Charles and Caroline's clearly held values of trust in and awareness of God, honest work, and standing for what is right. Perhaps to me, these values are the commonalities between my two "teachings."

***

The Torah tells of righteous figures, such as Noah and Abraham, who "walked with God." What could that look or feel like? Would it mean to have Him near at all times, whether good or bad, prosaic or exquisite?

We call the traditional precepts of Torah lived in practical life, halakha, the path. Do we think about walking with God as we follow traditional Jewish mores?

In order to walk—or live—with awareness of God, one first must be able to cultivate what is trendily called mindfulness, or awareness of one's self and surroundings. Such mindfulness requires sensitivity, honesty, and calm of spirit that may not come naturally, particularly in our frenzied first-world lives, but can be cultivated. In counseling terms, mindfulness is often proffered as a counterbalance to stress, whose byproducts can be chaos, anxiety, or neurosis. By calming the mind and cultivating an awareness of what is happening in one's body and mind, one will be able to slow and bring some order to the chaos or neurosis, as well as promote an outlook that emphasizes "glass half-full" rather than half-empty.

Reverence assumes the ability to be still—for without calm and a measure of emptiness one cannot be filled with awe—and must incorporate a measure of gratitude, for one cannot give honor while in the same moment complaining about one's condition. Our sages considered the state of gratitude to lead to reverence; for this reason, we are called *Yehudim*, named for Jacob's son Yehuda, the root of whose name means "to give thanks." As the Psalmist wrote, and many Jews recite daily, *Tov l'hodot l'Hashem* , it is good to give thanks to Hashem. A Jew's state in the world is to represent the energy of giving thanks, *hoda'a*, for when one appreciates what one has, one grows in reverence to the source of the gifts.

Over 25 years ago, it was a guide on a teen tour to Israel who first left me questioning whether Jews might be uniquely challenged by reverence. Our sabra guide led us on a hike through a pristine nature preserve, and then had us take a seat by the side of a stream. He asked us to listen silently to the water, the sounds of the birds, the air whistling in the rushes. To be mindful, in other words. Inevitably, one teenager fell prey to the temptation to fill the momentary quiet by cracking a joke and someone else had a rebound. The tour guide threw up his hands and said, "You see? You can't get a Jew to shut up for more than ten seconds!"

It may be the case that many teenagers would be challenged by sitting silently at the edge of a stream. But as I grew older and more aware of cultural differences (and the Jewish predilection for self-expression in particular), I better understood what the guide may have been getting at. I paid closer attention to the very detailed biblical descriptions of our people wandering in the wilderness of Sinai.

"Stiff-necked," obstinate, complaining about the lack of cucumbers and leeks after being redeemed from bondage by the very hand of God: the visceral recounting in Exodus is stark. Sadly, this very pointed national characterization of our people closes thousands of years in a heartbeat to a quotation from a Nazi general I once read: "You Jews, you complain about the shoe that has gone missing...what you don't recognize is that you are about to lose both your legs."

To our credit, it may be that our many injunctions to stand up for the oppressed and pursue justice have cultivated a national character that favors action and expression. We are even commanded to speak out if we see our peer involved in a wrong—something I took for granted, until I began working and living more closely with other cultural groups, some of whom may tend toward the reticent, frown upon opinions, or see minding someone else's business as meddling. Traditional Jewish ways of being may naturally lend themselves better to righteous *chutzpah* than to meditative calm.

***

As a school counselor for more than 15 years, I have mainly worked in the most challenging of public schools (by this I mean the schools where resources and family agency are scarce, poverty is commonplace, and high school graduation is pay dirt). When I came to work at one particular elementary school in Harlem, I was in my early 30s and a typical New York Jew: somewhat skeptical, prizing intellect, and Jewishly observant, apart from this. I began to notice that many of my colleagues drew upon their faith to retain a hopeful outlook in the dire circumstances in which we toiled—and sometimes, to get through the day. They began each morning by holding hands in a circle and having one of them lead them in a prayer for strength and guidance.

At first, I was taken aback. I questioned the appropriateness of bringing religion into a public institution. Soon I reasoned that no students were present, so perhaps it was fine. I found, upon reflection, that it was the ease with which these women incorporated God into their daily life that was disconcerting. Gradually, I came to realize that my colleagues were authentic people who were drawing on their trust in divine providence to get them through the trials of each challenging day of our work. They were walking with God. What's more, they were not some stereotype of a church lady, spouting platitudes about grace or laying judgment, but women who chose to labor authentically in one of the most challenging environments. When faced with grave adversity, the most base conditions and crudest of human behavior, they chose not to isolate, or sink and respond at that level, but to lean on God in order to rise above.

This recognition opened the door for me to see the utility of that morning prayer in bringing God, in a practical and real way, into daily life. The earnest prayer of my colleagues had led me to question what purpose my cynicism served and whether it was compatible with a religio-spiritual way of life.

It was similar with my reaction to "I'm blessed" as a common response to "How are you?" Initially, I thought this quaint, or at times, irrelevant. But slowly, I began to recognize this evidence of the power of language to create reality, much like an affirmation works on one's subconscious. Too, I saw the verbalization as a reminder, amid the temptation to complain, that actually, we are, here in the first world, all blessed. Where I had dismissed the similar tendency of some Jews to answer similarly with a *barukh HaShem*, bless God, I saw the power of such an utterance to affect one's spiritual standing in that moment.

I am in touch with these colleagues from time to time and one of them in particular has become a close friend. She and I have had many a heart-to-heart about God and the purpose of religion. Once, I shared with her my struggle to find a synagogue in which a palpable sense of reverence was the norm. I asked her if there was any issue surrounding congregants talking during the service at her church. She had to

clarify the question, before she could even begin to answer it.

L: You mean talking when they come *in* to the service?

R: Possibly. Or during. Just sitting there in the pews having a good chat during the service.

L: (Long pause.) Well, if you come in and did the hug and greeting thing before taking your seat I guess that could be considered fellowship, so it might be okay...

R: But what if you sat and kept on talking?

L: (clearly having trouble envisioning what is sadly commonplace on the Modern Orthodox front) Like, when the congregation is praying?

R: (nod)

L: I mean, I might think that person was new to the path and didn't yet know better. Otherwise, I'd have to wonder...why'd they come?

This little exchange left me with a twinge in my chest, as the implicit sense that one would comport oneself reverently in the house of God made me nothing less than jealous. I will spare the reader a litany of synagogues in which talking is the status quo; suffice it to say that I have yet to discover a sanctuary in which there seems to be awareness of the root of that word: *sanctus*, holy. Let me share only that on one occasion, a Friday night about a decade ago, I was verbally accosted after services on Manhattan's Upper West Side, after I had gently shushed a middle-aged man through the *mehitza* when his personal conversation turned into a coffee klatch without the hot drinks. Wearing my then-infant son in a snuggly, I was waiting for my husband in the foyer when this man approached me and berated me for quieting him. "Don't you ever tell me to be quiet in *shul* again!" he said in threatening tone. I haven't been back to that particular shul, but, threats apart, I haven't found it much different wherever I go. The sense of entitlement to do as one pleases in a holy place, in the midst of addressing one's maker, bears out the sense in which reverence holds no quarter in the typical Modern Orthodox sphere.

I believe the absence of reverence in observant Jewish life to be nothing less than a tragedy that is costing the Jewish people in more ways than may be recognized. Without reverence, our customs and mores lose their spiritual core and we revert to a tribe. This leaves us, as a community, with little of substance to offer our young people—to say nothing of our mature members. There is no argument to stay in the tribe for the sake of the tribe alone. In the open marketplace of ideas and spiritual pathways, Judaism without reverence is junk food and we cannot blame our numbers for recognizing this or turning to more sustaining spiritual fare. For, as the sardonic wit of one synagogue posting goes, "If you come here to talk, where do you go to *daven*?"

I would challenge us to ask ourselves: Is a synagogue a social club or a spiritual home? Is Jewish education for teaching content and behavior—now bend here, now say this—or for imbuing children with the sense that we go in the presence of the Almighty, that He has gifted us the rule book to best play this game of life and tasked us with a life's mission? Are we walking a path through life, like our forefathers, like Charles and Caroline Ingalls, with God at our sides, or are we showing up at *shul* out of a sense of duty to parents or community? And if the latter, is that enough to sustain us?