

**June 2010**

**Message From Rabbi Bob Mark**

In Parshat Behar, G-d speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai. One might wonder why it was necessary for Moses to go up to the mountain. Would it not have been just as easy for G-d to speak to Moses on the plains or in a valley? What is the significance of the mountain? Not just Mount Sinai, but any mountain.

On the week of Shabbat Behar and Bechukotai I had an opportunity to do something I had been hoping to do for a long time. The class I recently taught in American Jewish History motivated me to use a week's vacation time for the specific purpose of visiting sights of major importance in American Jewish History. Amongst those sights were the Gomez Mill House in Marlboro, NY, the Touro Synagogue where I was privileged to read the Torah and the colonial Jewish cemetery in Newport, RI, which is not normally open to the public.

Ironically, the significance/symbolism of the mountain became clear to me when I compared the family histories of the Gomez family and the Touro family. From the mountain top, one can look all around. One can look forward and backward and see or imagine the past and the future. Both of these families were Jewish heroes as we established in the class. Judah Touro was a realtor of major importance in his day and accumulated a substantial fortune. Interestingly, although he was a major supporter of Jewish institutions (and others as well) he was not well connected to his own Jewish faith till very late in his life. At that time he became more observant and sought to do in death what he did not do in life. As a result of his lack of religious commitment during the bulk of his lifetime, the Touro family slowly drifted away from its history and its heritage and is totally assimilated. It is however, his legacy that the foundation he established over three hundred years ago that continues to fund the Touro Synagogue and enables the Newport RI Jewish community as small as it is to support the Synagogue and Community Center. Judah Touro looked at his past and saw the future. He did not like what he saw and albeit late in life he did what he could to make sure that those who wished to preserve our heritage and faith would have the resources to do so. It could be said that Judah Touro has a very large extended family that remembers him every Shabbat and Holiday. How much better would it be if part of that family included at least some of his direct descendants – it does not! Judah Touro's family suffered the fate of so many thousands of other Jewish families and by the fourth generation was withered on the vine, lost to Jewry.

Louis Gomez was perhaps one of the wealthiest men in the colonial era. His family home was kosher. He processed kosher meat and exported it to the Islands.

The ships he owned returned with raw sugar that his companies processed. He owned huge tracts of land and his companies cut, milled and marketed much of the lumber that helped build the NYC of its day. His companies were closed on Shabbat. He was also an American hero and he used his ships to run the British blockade so that they could deliver much of the supplies needed by Washington and his troops. At the Gomez home one can see the copy of the Denization papers given him by Queen Anne. Today, the originals are safe in a humidity controlled secure environment. The copy is as the original, soiled with stains and creases, worn in some places because that important paper, for which he paid 26 pounds sterling - at the time, a small fortune, were used to benefit not only himself but the entire Jewish community. That paper allowed him to own property, to pass on an inheritance, to have all the rights of a British citizen and the protection of the queen. On the wall to the right of the Denization papers is a family tree hand written and hard to read. It traces the family line till the early 1900's, This tree however is one that is very different than virtually all those of other colonial Jewish families. It shows a family that has continued its connection with Judaism. Included in the list of descendants are members of the Lazarus family (of Emma Lazarus fame) and the Cardozo family (Benjamin Cardozo was the first Jewish supreme court justice). It is not a perfect record, I don't know if any Jewish family has one. But, the family heritage survives. It was members of the family that purchased the home for the current foundation that owns it and that insisted that a mezuzah be prominently placed on the doors to the building. A chanukiah and Shabbat candle holder are on prominent display. Luis Gomez looked back. He saw that as Jews we must be prepared not only to be proud Jews when we are pursued by anti Semites, but we must remain so when we become part of the general population, accepted, even liked. He looked forward, he knew what he would want to see if he were still alive, he prepared the foundation, he set the tone, his memory reaps the reward, at least part of his family remembers and still participates.

It is up to each and every one of us to climb our own mountain. Look back, do you like what you see? Look ahead, do you still like what you see? Will your family take the Touro path or the Gomez path? What will your legacy be?

May the memories of both these Jewish heroes be blessed and may their souls be bound to the souls of the immortals. May we all benefit from the lessons we learn from their lives. Amen.