

**BEHUKKOTAI**  
**May 24, 2008**  
**What would Jeremiah think of Carrie Bradshaw?**  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

I am not a big fan of sermon titles – from my perspective they are too much work. It is hard enough to come up with an interesting sermon every week – now I have to come up with a snappy title as well? I remember when I was a young assistant rabbi in Southfield Michigan and the shul I was at had the custom of publishing sermon titles in the bulletin which meant you had to submit them weeks in advance. So I asked my senior rabbi, Irwin Groner, how he did it – how was he so organized to know what he was going to speak about weeks in advance – “for example, this week your sermon title is ‘The unanswered question.’ How did you know what to speak about weeks ago when you submitted that title?” “Ah,” he smiled and then replied, “that was the unanswered question!”

But I do sometimes admire those boards outside the churches that list the minister’s sermon for the coming week. Sometimes the titles are clever enough to almost make me want to stop by and listen in. Well, this week I have a sermon title – and one that we could have put on the front lawn and maybe attracted a few more worshippers – my topic for today is: “What would Jeremiah think of Carrie Bradshaw?”

Now I don’t want to embarrass anyone – so allow me to identify the characters in my title because I suspect some of you aren’t familiar with one or the other of them. While I hope that Jeremiah is the more familiar of the two – I am not that comfortable in such an assertion as to test it with a show of hands.

Carrie Bradshaw is the fictional heroine of the hit HBO TV series “Sex and the City” which ran from 1998 to 2004, winning seven Emmy Awards and has been broadcast in 200 countries. It is still watched, in reruns, by an average 2.5 million viewers every day. It is back in the news because the long awaited movie blockbuster reviving those much loved characters Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, Miranda and Mr. Big is opening this week in a movie theater near you. As Newsweek magazine said, “For many women in New York and beyond, the release of the film is a major social event.” Why? More on that later.

And Jeremiah – well Jeremiah was one of the great prophets of Israel, who lived around 628 BCE. His home was Anatot, a small town to the north of Jerusalem in the tribe country of Benjamin. He was an eye witness to the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE and his prophecies of doom and his warnings and his descriptions of the terrible events surrounding it make up some of the most remarkable literature in world history. I have no official statistics but I suspect that if 2.5 million people are still watching Sex and the City each and every day – that Jeremiah’s readership, as part of the Bible far exceeds that in popularity and influence. For example -- Aaron and Reed’s beautiful recitation of today’s *Haftarah* was a selection from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> chapters of the book that comprised Jeremiah’s speeches.

Now I suspect that never before in human history has anyone ever mentioned Jeremiah and Carrie Bradshaw in the same sentence – but the more I thought about it – the more I realized that

the two might have had a lot to talk about had they ever had the chance to meet – because at the core and each in their own way – they are wrestling with the same fundamental, existential dilemma.

According to Newsweek magazine's Julia Baird, the reason for the enormous popularity of *Sex and the City*, is that "when women watch it, they see themselves. Older, younger, or imagined selves, perhaps, but themselves nonetheless."

A lot of the show's popularity had to do with the brazenness, the sex and the fashions and the kind of open discussions about subjects that were heretofore taboo, but at its core – "there was one question it kept exploring over and over again," said Julian Baird, "was it OK for a woman to be alone?"

It was a question that resonated with a generation of young (and not so young woman). According to Ms. Baird, "*Sex and the City*" gave voice to a question that had been building for more than a hundred years. The idea that love could and should be a part of marriage was introduced in the early days of the Enlightenment. Before that, marriage was viewed much more as a utilitarian institution – women by and large were created to have children and put dinner on the table. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one catchphrase went, "Better single than miserably married," but, argues Baird, few believed it. Bachelor women were called spinsters. In 1957, 80% of Americans told pollsters that people who were single by choice were "sick," "neurotic" or, "immoral." But by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, armed with the pill, an education and a job, more women chose to wait before becoming a wife. By the 1990's unprecedented numbers of women in Western countries were delaying marriage and childbirth. In 1998 when "*Sex and the City*" first aired, there were 21 million American women over the age of 18 who had never married. More than one in four households contained only one person.

This was the audience for "*Sex and the City*." They were redefining what it meant to be single. I quote now from the Newsweek article: "When Carrie – contemplating marriage to the handsome but not heart stopping Aidan – tried on big, puffy wedding dresses with Miranda, she started choking and broke out in a rash. She complained that she was "missing the bride gene. I should be put in a test tube and studied." She wrote later in one of her trademark voice-over sex-column entries, "As progressive as our society claims to be, there are still certain life targets we are all supposed to hit: marriage, babies and a home to call your own. But what if instead of breaking out into a smile, you break out into a rash? Is something wrong with the system, or is it you?"

This is what "*Sex and the City*" was about – the system and how contemporary women did or did not fit into it – love, marriage, home and children – were these blessings or curses?

Today's Torah portion *Bechukkotai*, knows a little about the subject of blessings and curses. "Blessed will the people be if they follow the ways of the Lord and cursed will the people be if they do not." And if that admonition is not sufficient - the *parasha* goes on to enumerate in great detail a list of blessing and curses that lie in our future depending on the choices we make. "*Sex and the City*" is a comedy – but there is nothing funny about the recitation of this section in today's torah portion. Very few passages in world literature are more terrifying than the Torah's list of threats and curses. It is no wonder that when we read it from the pulpit there is a tradition to read

it in an undertone so as not even to give voice to these words.

The *Haftarah* for today which are the words of Jeremiah, also carries forward the theme of threats and curses, though you might wonder: what is there left to threaten after all the threats that have already been made? Jeremiah finds one more. He says: "*Arur ha-gever asher yivtach ba-adam*, cursed be one who puts his trust in man, and depends upon his own might."

He will be like a tree that stands alone in the desert,  
He will not see when good comes,  
He will stand alone in the wilderness,  
In a barren land where nothing grows." (Jer 17:5-6)

The prophet is saying that the greatest disease in the world is loneliness. And then the prophet draws a description of righteousness:

*Baruch ha-gever asher yivtach ba-shem*  
Blessed is the person who trusts in the Lord...  
And rests his confidence in Him,  
He will be like a tree planted by the riverside,  
Which sends its roots out wide,  
And need not fear when heat comes,  
Whose leaves will be many,  
And need not worry in the years of drought,  
And who will always bear fruit.

If you learn to trust in God you will be strengthened like a tree that grows among many others, bringing forth rich fruit. If the worst punishment the prophet could imagine was isolation and loneliness, then the greatest reward is togetherness and fruitfulness.

Although separated by 2500 years and half a world apart – although speaking very different languages and styles – although one explores the nature of comedy and the other tragedy – I believe that Carrie Bradshaw and *Yermiyahu ben Hilkiyahu* would indeed have had much to talk about had they met – because they both were plumbing the depths of loneliness and its implications for the human condition. Both understood that there was no curse worse than being alone.

I think that Carrie Bradshaw would have applauded Jeremiah when he added loneliness to the list of curses. For what good is it if you have everything, but you have no one with whom to share it? Jeremiah was right when he stated that the greatest blessing is companionship. For one can endure any hardship, survive any sorrow, if he has someone to share it with. To be entirely alone is one of the most dreadful curses that there can be. Jewish tradition seemed to grasp what a dreadful curse loneliness is, and much of Judaism can be understood as providing the antidote to loneliness. Judaism has devised a network of ways by which a person can feel connected, and not feel isolated.

The first thing that Judaism tells us is that if you want to avoid a life of loneliness, develop a relationship with God. And this is what Jeremiah refers to when he says: "blessed be the man

who puts his trust in the Lord". For one who takes God seriously, who senses God everywhere whether it be in the synagogue, in the market place, or at home, is never alone. He is always with God.

I have noticed an unmistakable pattern emerging over the past few years. Every now and then someone will come to my office to talk to me about God. Believe it or not - it does happen occasionally. But, the majority of these people have one thing in common. They are recovering alcoholics. They are struggling with their addiction and they find God as an important element in their recovery as they grapple with living with the loneliness that alcohol helped them escape. Most of these people are in my office as a direct consequence of the 12 step program which emphasizes the recognition of a "Higher Authority" as a first and fundamental step in the recovery process. I am glad that I have something to help these people who come to me in search of an answer. I am only sorry that it takes this sense of desperation to bring them to my door. Wouldn't it be nice if the rest of my congregation could come to the realization that God is the answer for all kinds of dependency problems - not only alcohol or drugs; and that those who place their trust in the Lord *Lo Ira Ra* - - Need not fear.

The second thing that Judaism advises us to do to avoid loneliness is to develop a family. If Judaism did not invent the idea of family - it certainly raised it to an art form. The family has always been the great link between the individual and the world. "Home and family is where you belong, not because you have earned it, not because you have purchased it, but simply because you are you." An exasperated parent recently told me that: "their child had gone too far this time-he had no choice but to cut the child off - he was on his own!" I responded that there is no such thing as going too far when it comes to a child. I don't know where this custom came from of sitting *shiva* for a child who intermarries. I find the concept reprehensible. We may be disappointed in our children, we may be angry, we may even be disgusted by our children - and we have a right and a responsibility to express our disappointment, our anger and even our disgust - but the bond continues, the relationship endures - it may never be severed. Never! As a Jew you should always be able to turn to your family.

And the third great instrument that the Jewish people had to preserve them from loneliness was the Jewish people itself. To be a Jew is to be connected. People often share with me moments of connectedness with other Jews. It may be wandering in a foreign city; they feel strange, a little bit out of it - when suddenly they see a Jewish name on a store. They walk into the store, identify themselves as fellow Jews and are warmly welcomed. When one goes into the synagogue in a foreign country, one finds family there. No matter what country - we may not speak the language of the land - but we have a common language with the Jews of that land. We also speak of "Jewish Geography" - the game we play when two Jews meet and try and find a third mutual friend based on some form of association of how small and intimate the Jewish world is. I bet everyone sitting here has such stories. I have a theory that all Jews know one another. However some have just not yet met.

This truth - of the importance of connectedness - to God, to family and to our people - explains a number of things. For one, it explains why active membership in the synagogue and in the various institutions of the Jewish community is so important. It is not the fact that you get to pay dues or get your name on a membership list, or get to receive a monthly bulletin -

however exciting these privileges are. Rather it is the feeling that one gains by belonging, of being connected through the synagogue to God, to the Jewish community, and to the Jewish people.

I find it interesting to note – that “Sex and the City” which was created to explore the question: “Is it OK for a woman to be alone?”, answered it by the end of the series with all of the heroines in the show having husbands or lovers. And the build up to the movie that is being released this week, all centers on the question whether Carrie and Big finally get married. It seems that Jeremiah and Carrie may have the same last word: *Baruch ha-gever asher yivtach ba-shem...v'haya k'eytz shatul al mayim – in our deepest most innermost yearning we all seek to be like a tree planted by the waters – with deep roots and life giving water.*

The greatest blessing that we can experience is companionship with others: Or as Jeremiah might have said it: The greatest blessing we can experience is companionship: with God, with family, with the Jewish people. For life is with people. I hope Carrie marries Big.