

***All stories that teach a lesson are "true,"
but some are also factual.
This story is true and factual....***

THE RABBI AND THE ROSARY

Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor

Although my role as Program Chair of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) placed several responsibilities on my shoulders, my wife had one very important mission for me on my most recent trip to the Vatican. A co-worker and her husband were about to have a baby, and since they were devout Catholics, my wife thought it appropriate for me to purchase a rosary for the new child while I was in Vatican City. Her instructions were explicit – buy just one rosary.

I broke away from my meeting to spend some time looking through the religious shops that encircle St. Peter's Square – many of which have been owned and run by Jews for centuries. I stopped near a street dealer to examine the many kinds of rosaries, and explained to the seller that I needed to buy just one for a child about to be born. We haggled over the price over one I had selected – a beautiful little rosary made of crystal beads enclosed in a gold and cloisonné box. Finally the seller announced that he would sell me three for the price of two. I asked him to throw in a snow-globe which depicted the Vatican on one side and the Coliseum on the other side to add to my wife's collection of these collectibles. The three rosaries and the snow-globe were placed in a blue plastic bag, and off I went to the audience with Pope John Paul II, whom I first met in 1990 at a meeting of IJCIC at the Vatican and again, in 1995, when the Pope traveled to New York City.

At the conclusion of the audience we were told that the Pope would bless any religious articles that people had with them. I raised my blue plastic bag, and now possessed three "blessed" rosaries and one "blessed" snow-globe. They were then placed in my back-pack and off I went to more meetings.

It was time to return home and I boarded the plane for the eight plus hour trip home. I took my seat and found myself seated next to a gentleman about my age. We struck up a conversation and discussed where in the world we had lived; we discussed our travels; we shared our interest in snow-skiing and water skiing. He described his work and I spoke of my former life in theater and music (I try to avoid talking about my life as a rabbi when on a plane – often describing myself as a teacher or professor or counselor). Our conversation turned to our children. I talked about my three children and he spoke of his oldest son. Then I could see his face turn ashen as his voice, pitched lower and softer, told me about his two year-old son who had died last on New Year's Day.

I tried to get him to talk about it and asked him questions about how he and his wife had dealt with the tragedy, and to whom did they turn for solace. He described himself as being raised a Catholic – his wife was a Methodist. He asked me what I did and I told him that I was a rabbi. I also told him about the Jewish concept of “beshert” – that things are foreordained, ‘in the cards.’ We both agreed that perhaps our sitting together was “beshert.” We spent a great amount of time speaking of faith and hope, of doubt and pain. In some small way, I hope that I was helpful. After a while our conversation lightened up, we worked a cross-word puzzle together (although I was in a “brain-freeze” – still reeling from our impromptu counseling session). We napped and ate as our plane approached JFK.

As our plane was getting closer to New York, I offered that it was my hope and prayer for him and his family that this New Year be a better year for them. He agreed, and said that he was hopeful as he had just learned that his wife was pregnant and that this New Year might find them with a new child – a daughter.

I asked him if he remembered the word that I had taught him – “beshert.” I then told him the story of my assignment to purchase one rosary and that I came away with three. I asked him if he would take one of the rosaries as a gift to his new daughter. “Just remember,” I told him, “this was a rosary given to your daughter by a rabbi and blessed by the Pope.” Tears welled in our eyes and he thanked me. We shook hands as we deplaned and I gave him my card. “Please let me know when your daughter is born,” I said as we parted ways.

Upon my return home, I remembered that the following evening was Shabbat, and I still had a sermon to deliver. I opened the Torah to that week’s Torah portion, looking for inspiration. “Vayetze” – the story of Jacob’s flight from his brother, and decision to sleep for the night. He then dreams of a ladder that links heaven and earth with angels going up and down on it. Upon arising he pronounces eight of the most important words in the whole Torah, “Achayn yesh Adonai b’makom ha’zeh, v’anochi lo yadati – Behold, God is surely in this place, and I really didn’t know it!”

I had traveled from New York to the Vatican and back, but it was on the plane that I had another opportunity to find God.

A Postscript – I preached this story on Friday evening at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue. The following Monday I was scheduled to deliver the holiday sermon at St. Luke’s - Roosevelt Medical Center’s Advent Festival Service. I jettisoned the prepared text that I had written and told this story. At the end of the service, the one question I heard over and over was, “So, who will receive the third rosary?” To which my answer was, and is, “I will wait for God to let me know.”

December 2000