

Hey Moses, Got a Light?

By Michael Gold

One million people live in Westchester County, New York. I am one of the one million. A little more than ten percent of the county's population is Jewish.

Two million Jews live in New York State, out of a total population of twenty million. New York City is 30 miles south of my town, containing within its precincts more than 1.5 million Jews,

So, why do I feel like a lonely Jew?

When I venture beyond the Jew bubble, which is often, because I write a column for a local weekly newspaper, I sometimes meet people who are not Jewish, who say weird things about Jews.

For example, recently, I did a phone interview with a retired tugboat captain who was trying to get an environmental nonprofit off the ground. The captain wanted to raise funds to deploy a fleet of sailing ships around the world to spread the message that the planet is in great danger from climate change.

It all sounded very grandiose. But I gave the man the benefit of the doubt.

As we were talking, the man suddenly blurted out, "Are you a Jew?"

Seriously?

The captain's question pierced what I thought was the shield of my Jewish invisibility. This kind of stuff just isn't done in Westchester. Or so I thought.

"I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

"You sound kind of defensive," the captain said.

I thought I was just standing up for myself. I mumbled something about this kind of thing happening before, when I was a New York City elementary school teacher in the Bronx. Just a few years previous, a fellow teacher, pale as ivory stationary, a Christian immigrant from Bible Belt Tennessee, said to me, "I didn't know you were Jewish."

All I knew how to say at the time was, "I am."

A similar thing had happened at the same Bronx school years before, on parent-teacher conference night. A parent, of Hispanic heritage, came into my class and blurted out, "I love the Jews! They have so much money and they keep to themselves!"

The captain, the Tennessee school teacher and the mother had "othered" me, insinuating that I was somehow set apart from mainstream America even when they thought they were complimenting me.

So, when the captain inquired about me in the same vein, I thought I was ready. I wasn't. The captain proceeded to dig a much deeper hole, for both of us.

"I used to smuggle gasoline for the Russian mob in Brooklyn," he said, a criminal variation of the theme, "Some of my best friends are Jews."

Then, the captain finished tunneling into the chasm, by saying, "Pound for pound, the Jewish people are the most productive people on the face of the Earth."

I didn't want to be a member of the most productive people on the Earth if it meant that people like the ship captain were going to keep separating us out from the rest of humanity.

I managed to turn the conversation back to climate change – it was much safer.

I thought I was done with the Jew stuff. Then it happened again, when I interviewed a Vietnam veteran for a Memorial Day column. The guy -- let's call him Vinny -- who grew up in the Bronx, had won the Silver Star and a Purple Heart during the war. He'd been shot in the leg. His veins collapsed. He could have died. His cousin from the Bronx, who was also his best friend, was blown up by the North Vietnamese. Four members of Vinny's squad were killed too. He had really suffered, both physically and mentally. I liked him a lot.

In the middle of our interview, at a local diner, Vinny, an incredibly nice guy, Catholic, who wore a giant silver-colored cross on his chest, asked, "Are you Jewish?"

So, okay, this was a gentler version of the incident with the ship captain. But I still felt embarrassed. This is America, baby, we are a country full of all different kinds of religions, tribes and peoples, a playground where everyone

is supposed to be able to dig in the sandbox or go down the slide without questioning what you believe, religion-wise, or where you're from.

I know it really doesn't work that way – but that's the theory. It's a good theory. I've staked much of my existence on that theory.

Vinny then went on about how the Jews are favored by God and that the college student protesters screaming epithets against Israel and the Jews all over the country are going to get punished by Him.

I was of two minds about this.

One, I was grateful for this tiny expression of support, because the stories about the protesters were extremely unnerving. The student calling for the death of the Jews, others demanding to gas the Jews, the saint Greta Thunberg, who's earnestly trying to save our common climate, yelling, "Crush Zionism!" torched my mind with their murderous thoughts. I felt as if I was suddenly losing my place in America and the world. Vinny gave me a brief bit of support. It was a relief. He called me, "buddy." Somebody still wanted me here!

On the other hand, I didn't know how to possibly work out the theological possibilities of God taking time out from His busy workday to single out the protesters for a visit to the woodshed in heaven, when the time came, after they were all dead.

Vinny told me he had created about 4,000 plastic statues of Moses holding the Ten Commandments tablets in front of a burning bush. He had tried to sell them but hadn't much success.

Then he told me he owed the bank about \$300,000, money he'd borrowed to build his Moses statues. The man had gone into a huge amount of debt to manufacture these things. Even if he had sold every one of them, he would never get back the money on the loan. Whatever else you may think about what he'd done, that's commitment. He believed in the power of the commandments.

He insisted on giving me two statues. They were packaged in boxes in his house. After the interview, we left the diner, and got in our cars. I followed Vinny's giant tank of a Hummer back to his house. He had me wait in his living room while he went to the basement to retrieve the statues.

He came upstairs with two boxes. The boxes state on the sides, "Moses and the Burning Bush – Turn off the lights, listen to the story, watch the glow

and feel GOD's presence...With this inspiring recreation of Moses and the Burning Bush, our families, and especially our children can grow, witnessing God giving Moses His laws for all to know, honor and obey. Let us all live God's laws and put a smile on His face."

The statue itself is a molded plastic version of Moses, about six inches high, with the required long grey hair and beard, standing on Mt. Sinai holding a tablet of plastic of the Ten Commandments, one in each arm, with Hebrew letters inscribed on the stones.

A burning bush, about three inches high, stood in front of the plastic Moses. When you place batteries in the unit and move a switch, the bush lights up with yellow and red flares. God himself utters each of the commandments, in a sonorous, echoing voice that is actually Vinny's, using some kind of device to make his voice deeper and more commanding, I think.

I put batteries into my little Moses statue, then moved the switch to see what he had to say.

First thing, the burning bush in front of Moses fired up with light. But the plastic bush was not consumed.

Moses started talking immediately.

"I'm really tired of looking at the bush," he said.

"Isn't there anything else on your mind?" I asked. "How's God doing these days?"

"Look, I'm exhausted. I've been carrying around these tablets for 5,000 years. You try it sometime. Plus, God is a really tough thing to talk about. He won't even let me in Heaven, which is why I'm right here, encased in plastic, talking to some schlub wearing a tee-shirt from a local pizzeria."

"Why won't he let you in Heaven?"

"He thinks I was involved in a bad Israelite real estate deal. How could I be? I'm stuck on a piece of plastic made in China. Did he ever think of that? Yeah, sure, the Master of the Universe, who says he sees everything!"

"Well, holding those tablets is good for building muscle in your arms."

"That's pretty much the last thing on my mind, okay? I'm the father of all ethical law. The governor of Louisiana wants to put the Ten Commandments in every classroom. I've got a lot more important things to worry about."

"What do you think about this Louisiana thing?"

"I don't have a problem with people putting up the Ten Commandments in public places. This is my life's work. What I do have a problem with is people, especially political leaders saying we've got to follow the commandments, then breaking them virtually every day of their lives. The hypocrisy takes my breath away. And I don't have a lot of breath to begin with."

"How do you know all this?"

"You think I like staring at a burning bush all day and night? If I don't read, I'll go crazy. The law that says, 'Thou Shall Not Kill?'" Why do so many Americans own guns? How have we made it so easy to kill people? In my day, you had to do it with your own hands, throw stones, or use a knife. Now, one pull on the trigger and somebody's dead. This is unacceptable and it's worse when these supposedly religious people, who worship the same God I do, are saying let's get more guns out there."

"You've got a lot on your mind."

"My heart is very heavy, pizza schlub. Turn off the switch, so I can go back to sleep for a while."

"Wait! I have a question. It seems that every time I turn around, someone's asking me if I'm Jewish."

"That wasn't a question."

"How would you deal with something like that?"

"Remember, pizza boy, that the commandments are the foundation for living an ethical life. You can't expect everybody to behave the way you want. Unfortunately, the world is broken into tribes. Sometimes, I suspect, we're not better than a bunch of chimpanzees fighting over territory. But that's where the law comes in. That's what makes us different."

"Different, how?"

"If you follow the law, if you're nice, maybe other people will respond to that. You can't change the world as much as I did, but you do what you can. We all have the potential to change, for growth."

"You sound like a motivational coach."

"Is that such a bad thing to be? It's better than dealing with golden calves and breaking tablets when people make you angry."

"This is all you have to say?"

"I've got enough problems standing on this plastic display of a mountain. I will leave you with this thought: If the Ten Commandments are not followed by everyone, then they become meaningless. The law applies to us all. If it doesn't, then we make a mockery of what justice is supposed to be."

"That was pretty good."

"Also, one more thing. don't stay a lonely Jew. Go to your pizzeria. Welcome the stranger, as I was welcomed by the Midianites. Talk to people. But don't let lies go unanswered. And for God's sake, try to relax a little! You should feel lucky you're not me."

I did what plastic Moses asked and turned off the switch. But his message still lights me up.