

Our Torah portion today opens with the words: *It came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham.* Those of us who have been following the development of the Abraham story as it unfolds in the Torah will surely remember that this is not the first time that Abraham finds himself tested.

Abraham has led a life full of difficulty and change. In fact, the Pirke Avot asserts that Abraham faced ten trials in his lifetime. The Mishnah does not say what these ten were. But Maimonides, in his commentary on the Mishnah, offers a list of the first nine trials as follows:

- 1) He is asked to leave his native land
- 2) Arriving in Canaan and there was a famine in the land
- 3) Sarah was taken to the house of Pharaoh
- 4) His war against the kings of the land
- 5) The long struggle of childlessness with Sarah, culminating in his taking Hagar as a wife
- 6) When he is asked to circumcise himself at an advanced age
- 7) When Sarah is captured by the king of Gerar and taken to his house
- 8) When God asks him to send away Hagar
- 9) The estrangement from his first born son of Ishmael

So that when God again speaks to Abraham, towards the end of his life, saying *Take your son your only son, whom you love, Isaac; And go to the land of Moriah, and bring him up as a sacrifice on one of the mountains that I will show you,* we understand that this is just the latest difficult situation in a life filled with adversity.

The first words in this sentence in the Hebrew, ***kach na***, should actually be translated as *Please* take your son. Rashi comments on this:

Kach na: Please take your son. God uses the language of request: *Please undertake this trial for me, so that people will not say that the early ones were not serious.*

This comment reflects a view that sees Abraham and God as engaged in a kind of partnership, two heroes in a public story--God doling out one difficult situation after another, like obstacles on an obstacle course, and

Abraham successfully meeting them, gracefully jumping over obstacle after obstacle, while others stand back in admiration.

I am not so sure this is how Abraham would have seen his life.

But the fact that his life has been, not only full of blessing and wealth and prestige, but also laden with disappointment and crisis and loss, makes Abraham's personality and character interesting to me. And perhaps to you as well.

After all, all of us fall into this category of "people whose lives are a mixture of blessing and disappointment, of success and crisis and loss" We, too, may have, in our lives, been uprooted or have uprooted ourselves. We have had to start over again in new schools or new jobs or new towns. We may have endured periods of famine: times of emotional or economic hardship. Some of us have gone to war or otherwise put ourselves in harms way in the service of our country. We have been challenged by situations in our relationships or marriages. We may have children with whom we have difficult relationships or from whom we are alienated .

OK--most of us have not been asked to circumcise ourselves at an advanced age! But we certainly have endured physical ailments or disabilities, or faced diseases in our youth or as we age. And we have faced both the prospect and sometimes the fact of losing those whom we love the most.

What is it about Abraham? What can we learn about our own lives from the way Abraham responds to adversity and to blessing? Is there a quality with which Abraham faces the world from which we can learn, that can help us to lead our lives with courage and faith and blessing?

In the Hebrew, when God tells Abraham to "go to the land of Moriah" God uses the Hebrew words: **lech lecha el eretz hamoriah**. This expression--**lecha lecha**--spoken towards the end of Abraham's life, is the very same expression that God uses when God speaks to Abraham at the beginning of their relationship.

So perhaps we can learn from the peculiarity of this locution something about Abraham's life and faith. Perhaps Abraham's first instructions from God have determined something of the quality of Abraham.

Lech Lecha means, at one and the same time: *Go forward, go ahead, go onward in the world*; and also: *go to yourself*. It implies that there is a kind of deep connection here between the inner and the outer journey, A particular stance towards life, which a person can adopt as we journey through life. And these are the only two times in the Torah where this expression is used—near the beginning and towards the end of Abraham's life.

So this year, partly because of where I am in my own life, and partly because these words *lech lecha* ring out so strongly to me as I read over the Abraham story, I would like to see what happens if we try to think of Abraham as a kind of “hero of mindfulness.” And to view his life story not only as a courageous overcoming of obstacles, but as a journey towards wisdom and wholeness.

Rabbi Yael Levi has written some beautiful words, reflecting on the first time God speaks these words to Abraham. She highlights the closeness, the intertwining, of the inner and the outer journey. She calls her piece *Stepping Into Uncertainty*:

A journey begins with a call. The wisdom of the universe speaking:

Listen: pay attention, awaken to the stirrings of your heart.

Place your feet on solid ground

Before the first step, before even setting your course, open to questions:

As you lift your eyes to the road ahead, wonder what is worthwhile to carry forward

And what is best laid down

Each of us is called to turn, to change, to become in the face of uncertainty

Each of us is called to live fully and completely,

Even as we never know what life will bring

Torah encourage us to pay attention, to listen, to be discerning

Torah urges us to feel our feet on solid ground

Torah reminds us that we do not need to let go of everything

In order to be more of ourselves

These practices [paying attention, listening, discerning] can help us step forward into the paths of uncertainty, [knowing that] sometimes our journeys are going to be painful.

The wisdom of torah reminds us that the experience of pain

*Is not necessarily a sign that we made the wrong decision
Sometimes it is the pain that is the guide and the teacher
And the wisdom of our tradition urges us to look for signs
To take notice and trust that there will be guides along the way.*

Rabbi Levi writes about a way of looking at the world both without and within as a place that is open, and changing; and seeing change not only as threat but also of possibility.

I would like to think that if Abraham can be a hero for us, then it is because, in his ability to move forward when everything is suddenly thrown into question, Abraham may be modeling for us an attitude of spiritual strength which is also an outlook towards himself and the world. An attitude that allows us to see our own life journeys not only as succeeding and overcoming, but of deepening and expanding.

I am going to call this attitude: Curiosity

By this I do not mean the ordinary curiosity, such as curiosity about who will win the World Series this year. Nor do I mean what sometimes passes for curiosity in our lives, but is actually closer to gossip. Nor the curiosity that draws us respond to old college friends who friend us on Facebook, when we know we are just checking the picture to see if they have gotten older faster than we have. Or the kind of questions that begin with “Did you hear that so and so....?”

This is not the curiosity I have in mind. But rather curiosity as a spiritual discipline, as a *middah*, directed at the self, at our relationships with others and towards the world.

The Talmud in the tractate Berakhot 4a, urges us: Teach yourself to say *I do not know* and you will avoid falsehood”

There is a kind of curiosity that does not rush in to fill the void with an easy answer. But it stands its ground, willing to be in the presence of doubt or discomfort, but not paralyzed by it.

In our Torah portion, when God says *Take your son, your only son*, Abraham has no response. Or at least, the Torah does not give us his answer.

All the Torah tells us, in the next verse, is *vayashkem baboker*. Abraham gets up early in the morning, saddles his ass, and sets out on his journey.

On the surface *And he rose early in the morning* is a verse that requires no comment. Of course he got up early in the morning! That's when you get up. Now if he slept late in the morning--that would require a comment!

But one midrash does comment: *Vayashkem Baboker: He got up early in the morning. And why? So other people would not see him going.*

I think Abraham does not want to face other people because he is in a peculiar position. His mind is full of questions to which he does not yet have an answer. He does not yet have the words to explain what is changing, what has changed, neither to himself or to others. Even as he knows he is facing an entirely new situation, Abraham the man of emotional courage is wise enough not to speak at this time. But neither does he stay in place. He gets up in the morning and gets on with his day, carrying all his curiosity, his unformed and unresolved feelings.

Abraham's predicament is unusual, you say. It is a moment of extraordinary crisis. This is true. But I think many of us have had or will have moments of great uncertainty in our lives, moments when the future comes unstuck:

- when we lose a loved one;
- when we experience a financial setback;
- or receive a frightening diagnosis;
- when we experience failure, in our professional or personal lives.

At these moments we may experience fear, and that fear is real. And fear may tend to paralyze us, or shut us down, or throw us back on our most defensive habits of mind and heart.

But, in the words of the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer:

If we learn our inner landscape well enough, we realize: Yes, there is a turf there called fear. And we can choose to stand there if we want. But there are other places in that inner landscape, where we can stand, if we work on it. We can stand in a place of hope. We can stand in a place of appreciation of beauty.

And I would add: We can stand in a place of curiosity.

I would like to stand in the place of curiosity.

And I cannot help feeling that this stance of curiosity, and the *patience* that must accompany it, towards ourselves and towards the world we live in, is connected somehow, in a very deep way, with a kind of trust, or faith, or confidence--in the world, in ourselves, and perhaps in God as well.

Standing in a place of curiosity is not only useful when our world is turned upside down. Even in the ordinary situations of our life--And I'll just speak for myself here—there are times when I become aware of a certain restlessness in my own life. I may hear myself speaking words with my mouth, words I may have spoken many times, that my heart cannot quite confirm to be true. I sometimes become aware of a nagging disconnect between what I think I know to be true, and what I feel and experience in my life

Sometimes this disconnect, this lack of fit can create a profound disquiet that can be set aside by denial , or passivity, or resignation , or a withdrawal from our feelings. Or--I can choose to cultivate the *middah* of curiosity: to observe the contradictions, the discomfort, without needing to judge it just now.

If we can open ourselves to hard questions even at an age when we think we have seen everything, and **not** feel the need to answer them immediately, perhaps we may find a kind of strength and security that we did not know we had. This is the moment, if we will pay attention to it, when the possibility of something new, *really* new, has an opportunity to enter our lives

Curiosity directed at the self involves paying attention to what goes on when we think or speak or act. It involves noticing patterns, and habits. And **not** judging them immediately. It is allowing a voice in the back of our minds to observe what we are saying, or doing, and to ask, gently: *I wonder why I am acting this way?*

Perhaps one day such curiosity might even move ahead to another question—though it certainly does not have to-- *I wonder if I could act differently?*

Adopting curiosity as our first response to *others*, might enable us, not to *manage* them better--but to see them truly differently. Perhaps to see them for the very first time. When others speak to us, when they push our buttons or churn up our emotions, we can refrain from going down the tried and true paths of our habitual reactions. At these moments we can train our hearts and minds to say: *I am curious about this. I wonder why there is anger here? I wonder why this is bothering **me** so much ?*

Sam Feinstein has just written a beautiful piece in *Sh'ma* called *The Blessings of Curiosity*. There he writes:

Here is an exercise. Imagine what it might be like to encounter someone or something you are very familiar with as if it were the very first time. What would it be like to wake up and relate to your spouse, [or your child] without the build-up of preconceived notions? Though it might be scary and unsettling, encountering the ordinary and the routine may suddenly feel extraordinary, making your heart swell in appreciation, awe, humility and loving-kindness for what is right in front of you.

Pema Chodron, a Buddhist teacher, writes that

“When you open yourself to the continually changing, impermanent, dynamic nature of your own being ... you increase your capacity to love and care about other people and your capacity to not be afraid. You're able to keep your eyes open, your heart open, and your mind open.

And you notice when you get caught up in prejudice, bias, and aggression. You develop an enthusiasm for no longer watering those negative seeds, from now until the day you die.

And, you begin to think of your life as offering endless opportunities to start to do things differently.”¹

So let this be our vow for the coming year. To have the courage and the confidence and the curiosity of our father Abraham. To try and cultivate this way of being with ourselves and with others. And to trust that the things of

¹ Pema Chodron, *Practicing Peace in Times of War*

this world will fall into place, in their time. In his *Letters to a Young Poet* the poet Rilke wrote these words:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

And I do wonder if there is perhaps some connection between this kind of curiosity, if we can learn to practice it in relation to ourselves and to others, and our ability to turn in the direction our tradition asks us to turn at this time of year.

I want to leave you this morning, with a poem by Marcia Falk, in her new book of poems for the High Holidays. It is called: *Opening the Heart*

*At the year's turn
In the days between
We step away from what we know
Into the place we cannot yet name
Slowly the edges begin to yield
The hard places soften,
The gate to forgiveness opens*

Gmar Hatimah Tova: Be sealed in the Book Of Life for a Sweet New Year..