

Rosh Hashana Second Day 5775 9/26/14

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Congregation Kol Shofar

The Akeda, the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham, that we read today, is one of but ten trials endured by Abraham throughout his life.

Ten trials, taught our rabbinic sages, that showed Abraham to be the kind of person God would need to be father of the whole Jewish people:

How would he cope with being commanded to sacrifice his beloved son?

With famine? With the capturing of his wife? With having to circumcise himself?

And of course with Lech Lecha – being sent from his land and his home to a foreign land for an unknown journey.

Our great, great, great...grandfather Abe proved himself to be an extraordinary person to endure these life-changing trials and pass these tests.

What was it in him that singled him out in the first place to be the progenitor of an entire people and a model for us of how to be in the world?

The Torah doesn't really say, but the rabbis use their imagination to fill in the blanks. So, let's go back to Abraham's first trial and study a famous midrash about what happened in the moments just before God said to Avram Lech Lecha, Avram's first moments of God consciousness.

So remember, in the Torah, God says to Avram, Lech Lecha, go forth from your land, from your home, from your father's house to the land that I will show you.

On this verse, the midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 39:1, shares the teaching of Rabbi Yitzchak: This may be compared to a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a *bira doleket* (a castle aglow/lit up – like *lehadlik ner*).

He said: Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?

The owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the castle."

Similarly, because Abraham said, "Is it possible that this world has no guide, no one to look after it?", the Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, "I am the Master of the Universe." Hence, God said to Avram, Lech Lecha.

This somewhat cryptic midrash can be understood in different ways which I want to unpack with you – each understanding sheds important light on what we're doing here today on Rosh Hashana.

So what is this *bira doleket*? It's powerful that this midrash placed here in our tradition to elaborate on the beginning of Jewish peoplehood, the first moment of

Abraham's God-consciousness, can be understood in completely opposite ways. That in itself says a lot about us!

Rashi understands *doleket* (aglow, lit up) to mean illuminated, filled with light. So, in Rashi's reading: Abraham sees a world filled with light, the sun during the day, the moon and stars during the night, and he says: is it possible that this amazing, wondrous palace has no guide, no owner? Couldn't be – God peeks out from that question

and says, "I am the *baal habirah*, I am the owner of the castle."

This first understanding of the midrash has Abraham seeing the miraculous beauty and wonder of the world

(and remember his was a pagan world of idolatry)

and he concludes: there must be God in charge.

In this reading, the *bira doleket* means:

there are lights on in the castle, so there must be someone home.

This is one aspect of Rosh Hashana – we celebrate the creation of the world and we coronate God *hamelech* of it all.

This summer, Ezra went to a week of space camp and he came home every day asking about planets and outer space and stars and gravity, and trying to explain all this to a 3 year old kind of blows your mind, especially if you're not an astronomer or work for NASA or think about this stuff a lot.

"See, sweetie, we're a few of the billions of people who live on this ball of rock that's somehow spinning in space around the sun in an infinite universe of billions of stars and galaxies." You say this and your mind is so blown open that you put down that pot you were washing to

just have an Avraham moment of seeing the castle glowing and God peeking out.

So, Abraham saw this world and heard God say Lech Lecha-go forth and be the father of monotheism.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel would say, religion is our response to ultimate wonder, to moments of awe, to the sense of mystery.

(God in Search of Man, p. 112).

Our radical amazement compels us to respond, to act, to appreciate, and not to take for granted, to say thank you to Someone (with a capital S).

At the Kol Neshama Minyan, for the first blessing of Shacharit that praises God as creator of light, I started a tradition recently where someone shares an amazing nature fact. Last time, Arlene Greenberg shared that the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical number pattern, shows up all over nature – in flower petals, pinecones, sunflower seeds. And then we say the blessing: Blessed are You God *yotzer hameorot*, creator of lights. In other words:

Wow, is it possible there's no one looking after this castle full of light, that there's no one to say thank You to for this amazing miraculous world? (Avram, by the way, does seem to explore his doubt by asking the question "is it possible that the world has no guide?") But even in asking the question, Avraham saw God peek out and say "here I am."

Just in asking the question, there's a glimpse of an answer.

And with that, Avraham "*lech-lecha'ed*" forward to be a great nation and to be a blessing to the world, as the Torah says.

But that's only the first reading of the *bira doleket*.

Other commentators and most modern commentators read *bira doleket* – not filled with light, the way Rashi read it but as a castle in flames, as in: the world is on fire.

First of all, it's the more literal translation, and secondly, just as we look at our world today and see Hamas, ISIS, cancer, ebola, global warming, you name it, so too did our commentators look around and see their world on fire.

Here's what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the UK wrote:

"Abraham sees a palace. The world has order, and therefore it has a creator. But the palace is in flames. The world is full of *disorder*, evil, violence, and injustice. Now no one builds a building and then deserts it. If there is a fire, then there must be someone to put it out. The building must have an owner. Where is he?

That is the question, and it gives Abraham no peace...

That is the starting point of Jewish faith.

Faith is born not in the answer but in the question...

Jewish faith begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be.

It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Abraham's journey begins."

(A Letter in the Scroll p. 56-57)

In this reading, the castle isn't full of light; it's on fire. But Avram doesn't despair, doesn't give up and say "the building is burning and the world is going to hell."

Rather, from the flames he sees God look out and say Lech Lecha, “you, go forth and be a blessing.” In other words, Avram emerges as our founding father because he was the first one to see in the pain and destruction of the world the commanding presence of the Divine saying, go forth, there is much work for you to do here.

Another commentary on this midrash, by one of my teachers at JTS, Paul Mandel, suggests that God not only looks out from the burning castle to say “I’m the owner,” but that God says, “and I’m trapped in the fire. Help.” This burning world needs you, Avraham, I need you, and Avraham heeds that call – on behalf of himself and on behalf of his future descendants after him.

This is what qualifies Avraham to be the original Jew – he was the first one to sense God’s Presence and to hear God’s call in *both* the beauty and wonder of a glowing castle and in the flames and destruction of a world on fire.

Both readings are simultaneously true, like my teacher Rabbi Shelia Peltz Weinberg put it: Life is a sandwich between two slices of beauty and pain.

In both readings – the illuminated castle and the burning castle, Avraham heard Lech Lecha and was called to action to be a blessing.

This is the legacy that Avraham bequeathed to us even before the first of his ten trials began: An abiding combination of both wonder and discontent, of both gratitude and outrage, of both radical amazement and radical responsibility.

In terms of Rosh Hashana, I see it as two complementary aspects of today: There’s Malchuyot, God as King, God as the owner of illuminated castle, the castle filled with the beauty of the world’s light.

But then the castle is burning too.

The burning castle is Zichronot, that aspect of Rosh Hashana that says: God remembers us and needs us, and what we do matters.

Our actions *maavirin et roa hagezerah*, as our prayers say, our actions have the power to transform the harshness, the pain, of a world on fire.

In musaf, we’ll daven Malchuyot and Zichronot;

in Malchuyot, we’ll say: the castle is full of wondrous light and beauty –

there must be an owner, and we’ll bow down in prostration feeling how small we are in God’s vast and eternal world, and

in Zichronot we’ll say: the castle is on fire, and our help is needed, our actions can make a difference.

[It's like the two notes that Simcha Bunim said we should keep in each of our two pockets ("I am but dust and ashes"; "the world was created for me")]

On Rosh Hashana we celebrate the creation of the world, and we recognize that the world is filled with both beauty and pain, and in both we sense God peeking out at us from the castle, calling us to respond.

Rosh Hashana is a time to realign ourselves with our mission statement.

(Every year, I offer a new definition of teshuva –

turning, returning, response, returning home, to name a few –

maybe this is my new definition of teshuva this year –

checking ourselves: are we fulfilling our mission?)

And I love this midrash because it offers a mission statement for the Jewish people, based on those first revolutionary moments of Avram being called to create us as a new people in the world.

Do we see a world filled with light and beauty and feel compelled to respond, to give thanks, to give back?

And do we see a world on fire, filled with pain and violence and suffering, and feel compelled to respond, to help, to act?

As we begin a new year and celebrate the creation of the world and see that the castle is filled with both beautiful glowing light and with burning flames of destruction, may we follow in the path set forth for us by Abraham and answer yes to these questions.

Shana Tova.