**Rosh Hashanah 5785 -Day Two**

**By Rabbi Joel Mishkin**

The holidays always reintroduce us to the Patriarch Abraham through its Torah readings yesterday and today. However, I would like to begin this morning with an even more basic question that stems from an earlier page of Torah, at the very beginning of the portion, Lech Lecha. And that question is simply this: have you ever wondered why God singled out Abraham in the first place? We will read all about him and his family during these two days, but why was Abraham chosen? The book of Genesis never tells us the reason.

The truth of the matter is, Abraham just appears! The portion Lech Lecha begins, “The LORD said to Abraham, Go forth from your land…” And with those few words, we are off and running so-to-speak. The Bible almost begs us to ask the question why choose Abraham, but it never really gives us an answer. On the other hand, Jewish tradition over the centuries has often tried to fill in the blanks, to tell us something about the patriarch that would explain God’s embrace of him and his descendants. Surely some of the Talmudic sages seem to have thought, Abraham must have done something to earn God’s affection?

Now, the most famous answer is that Abraham fearlessly destroyed his father’s idols, exposing the theological bankruptcy of idolatry. This story is so well known that people are often shocked to learn that it’s not in the Bible. That is correct it’s not in the Bible and your Hebrew school teacher was wrong if he or she told you otherwise. It’s a Midrash invented by the rabbis.

However, there is another, less well-known Midrash that is worth examining closely and might give us a glimpse into what the rabbis were really thinking when it comes to Abraham. It reads: “The LORD said to Abraham, “Go forth from your land” (Gen. 12:1) … Rabbi Isaac said: To what may this be compared? To a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace full of light (dolekhet). He wondered, “Is it possible that this palace has no one who looks after it?” The owner of the building looked out at him, and said, “I am the owner of this palace.” Similarly Abraham our father wondered, “Is it possible that THIS WORLD has no one who looks after it?” The blessed Holy One looked at him, “I am the owner of the world.”

According to the story, Abraham intuits or infers a divine Creator from the fact that the universe is lit up. “It is a palace full of light.” You can imagine Abraham looking at the cosmos and becoming thunderstruck by the sheer beauty of creation. Maybe even sensing a pervasive meaningfulness through its remarkable construction leads him to intuit a Creator. A commentary attributed to the medieval sage Rashi interprets the story as an early form of what philosophers call “the argument from design,” in seeing the clarity of the beauty of the sun by day and the moon by night, Abraham wonders to himself, - is it possible that such a great thing could be without its having a guide - and at that point God looked at Abraham and announced - I am the owner of this world. Abraham intuits God from the majesty and beauty of God’s creation.

There’s just one problem with his interpretation - and it’s a big one. It is beset by a major linguistic difficulty - you see, in Rabbinic Hebrew, the word, mueret would have been the word to describe the world as lit up, whereas the word, doleket - the Hebrew word chosen for this midrash means, not lit up, but quite the opposite, it means a world in flames. And this seemingly small philological point yields a dramatic theological difference:

So the Midrash should read. The LORD said to Abraham, “Go forth from your land” R. Isaac said: To what may this be compared? To a man who was traveling from place to place and saw a palace in flames. He wondered, “Is it possible that this palace has no one who looks after it?” The owner of the building looked out at him and said, “I am the owner of the palace.”

Now, it is one thing to behold order, beauty or meaning and be led to an awareness of God. But to behold a palace in flames and THEREBY be led to an awareness of God - what are we to make of this bold, disturbing story?

So far from wonder, Abraham discovers God from the very midst of moral and existential anguish. What kind of world is this, a contemporary Abraham might ask? Where the poor are degraded, where the weak are exploited, where the powerless are crushed underfoot, where tyrants destroy lives without a second thought?

Reading our story, the 18th century sage, Rabbi David Lucia explains that, “when Abraham saw that the wicked were setting the world on fire, he began to doubt in his heart: perhaps there is no one who looks after this world. Immediately God appeared to him and said, “I am the owner of the world.”

What happens here, exactly for Abraham, for God, and between Abraham and God? The text does not tell us. And yet, perhaps that is part of its richness: it asks us to do the work of imagining Abraham in his moment of consternation and bewilderment, and to speculate about how that very state led him to God. In asking that question about Abraham, it also asks a question about God. What is it about Abraham’s state of agitation that elicits God’s self-revelation?

Abraham refuses to look away. Confronted with the abyss of meaninglessness, he will not avert his eyes. But not only does Abraham refuse to turn away, he really cares, “Is it possible that this world has no one to look after it? Whatever faith Abraham finds, it will not be an easy faith. It will be the faith of a man who has considered the possibility that all there is chaos and bloodshed - and that possibility shakes him to his core - it shakes him to action - According to this story, the founding father of the Jewish people is someone who will not hide from the reality of human suffering. This refusal to hide or look away, I think, is a manifestation of deep love. Faced with a world in flames, Abraham will not grow calloused or indifferent. He continues to care even when it hurts. And so he cries out.

If Abraham’s question is at heart really a protest - he is not simply confused by the state of the world - he is aghast and he gives voice to his horror, then that protest itself can be said to reveal a deep and abiding sense that THINGS ARE MEANT TO BE OTHERWISE. Abraham does not cry out simply because he doesn’t like the way the world presently looks; he objects because the reality he sees fails to measure up to a transcendent standard he intuits. The insistence that the world as he encounters it is not yet the world as it must be, as it is INTENDED to be, is itself a manifestation of faith.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it this way: Judaism begins not in the way 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.

The point is that if there is a God, if you will, an owner, and yet there is chaos, if you will, a world in flames, when God reassures Abraham that He is still there, that He is the owner, then Abraham must act as God’s covenantal partner, and we, as Abraham’s children must also act to do our best to set things right.

So how do we go about doing that? For certainly this past year has been a year far more than its share of chaos and conflict, violence and destruction. Our tradition teaches we dare not look away. On the contrary, we must respond with the sacred indignation. That is, we must say what needs to be said when we see something that requires indignation. Call attention to it and do something about it!

True story. Last year when we heard of the massacre of men, women and children on October 7th, like the rest of the civilized world, we were in shock. We cried out. First, in outrage, then in prayer, and then, with a call to action. On October 9th the day after the saddest Simchat Torah in memory, I wondered what our synagogue could do to demonstrate our sacred indignation at what we had just seen?

So here is what happened. First, we reached out to the Jewish National Fund who helped us to design our own Shabbat dedicated to a day of prayer for those who were killed and those who were held hostage, and to show our solidarity with the state of Israel. Attendance was strong that Shabbat morning and I remember thinking to myself that this was the right thing for our congregation to do, not merely to join in a community rally, but to dedicate ourselves to a Sabbath service of meaningful prayer.

But still, it was not enough. I began to have conversations with a close friend, Rabbi Matt Berkowitz, who lives in Jerusalem, whose daughter is serving in the Israeli army, and who is a Vice President for the Schechter Institutes, the institution that inspires Conservative Judaism in Israel today. First, Rabbi Berkowitz conducted a well-attended seminar via zoom from his home in Jerusalem where he spoke of several projects that the Schechter Institute had undertaken to support those who were so devastated by the attacks in the south. He went into detail about one village in particular, Ofakim, that was almost completely decimated. For the next several weeks following Rabbi Berkowitz’s seminar and some constant nudging by yours truly, we managed to raise seven thousand dollars for Ofakim.

Now I know, I heard of many synagogues doing many things, for example, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove raised half a million dollars from his pulpit at Park Avenue Synagogue on a Friday evening, and yes, that is a magnificent feat. But understand this; the dollars that our synagogue sent overseas was every bit as precious and as important. Why? Because it showed that even a small congregation with limited resources can move mountains when necessary. It made me proud to be your rabbi.

Dear friends, yes, world is a gift, but it sometimes can feel like an inferno; life is a gift, but it can sometimes be unbearably painful. According to our sages, Abraham saw the world in flames and he thought it must be without an owner, but God assured him that there was an owner and so Abraham did not look away. He knew that he would need to save it. Authentic spiritual life requires us to live with our eyes open and refuse to lie about what we see. So, side-by-side with gratitude for the good in this world lives the unabashed conviction that the world as it is, is a very far cry from the world as it should be, and with that, there is a demand that the gap between them begin to be closed. That must remain our sacred hope, but even more than that, our sacred promise, and may we strive to keep that promise alive in the coming year.