

High Holidays 5779/2018 Dvar Torah
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As many of you who were here last year may remember, my son, Razi, was born the week before Rosh Hashanah. In fact, his circumcision was on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah last year...Talk about an intense day!!

Today, you might see Razi walking around the hallway asking for Abba or Bamba [It's unclear which he loves more...] Watching Razi grow - learning to crawl, walk, talk - and seeing how far he has come in just one year has opened my eyes to see the world in new ways.

Over the summer, my wife, Anya, Razi and I were staying in a hotel room in Park City, Utah, - a relatively fine room with a bed on one side, a small dresser and table on the other, and a crib in the corner by the window. One morning, while playing with Razi on our bed, he took off. Crawling like a dog after a squirrel, (or actually like a baby after a shiny cell phone) Razi, not fully appreciating the power of gravity, crawled right off the bed and fell to the floor. Don't worry, Razi is quite alright, and was far less traumatized that we were.

He really is incredibly curious about everything. In fact, he often still tries to walk off the bed to grab the ipad, climb over the couch to play with the Shabbat candles, and run in the bathtub mesmerized by the splashing water.

To tell you the truth, I hope Razi never stops pursuing his curiosities even if they come with reasonable risks - because it is that vivacity and curiosity, which leads him out of his comfort zone, and will help him learn about the complexities of the world and his place within it.

Those same senses of curiosity, compassion, and eagerness to truly see what was happening around them is what, according to our tradition, enabled Abraham and Moses to be great leaders of the Jewish people.

Moses, while dutifully herding sheep, had the insight to stop and notice an improbable occurrence before him. A site of complex beauty and destruction that could have been easily missed had his eyes not been open with curiosity. Moses saw a bush on fire, whose leaves and branches were not burning up. How different might Moses' life and the history of the Jewish people have been if he had passed it by. The result was nothing short of coming into relationship with God and freeing an enslaved people.

Abraham had a somewhat parallel experience that we are told about in Breishit Rabbah, an ancient compendium of legends and traditions related to the stories in Genesis, the first book of the Torah. There, a question is asked: Why was Abraham chosen by God to be the Patriarch of the Jewish people and "father of many nations"? The answer: he was curious, his eyes were open to complexity, and he cared deeply about the world.

Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace "doleket". He said, "Is it possible that this palace lacks a person to look after it? The owner looked out and said, "I am the owner." Similarly, because Abraham our father 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."

The word doleket can mean either “lit up” in light or “alight” in flames.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, suggests that Abraham noticed the bright, intricate beauty of creation, and, at the same time, saw that it was in flames. He says, “The world is full of bloodshed, injustice and strife....What happened to the owner of the palace? Abraham cries...Could G-d have made a world only to abandon it? Would anyone build a palace and then desert it?”

R' Sacks continues, “Note that the owner of the palace does not make an attempt to get out of the burning building or to extinguish the flames. He is merely stating that He is the owner of the palace that is going up in smoke. It is as if, instead of racing out, the owner were calling for help. G-d made the palace, man set it on fire, and only man can put out the flames. Abraham asks G-d, “Where are you?” G-d replies, “I am here, where are you?” Man asks G-d, “Why did You abandon the world?” G-d asks man, “Why did you abandon Me?”

While they were far from perfect, and both stumbled multiple times, Moses and Abraham’s sense of compassionate curiosity, led them to stop, recognize and engage with the complexity of the world; the fact that it’s filled with incredible beauty and deep pain.

How many of us take the time to notice the Burning Bush or the lit up palace alight in flames? It’s so easy for the busi-ness of our lives to close off our sense of compassionate curiosity; leaving us all too often unaware of the incredible pain and deep beauty that fills the world. College is a time for immense exploration, but so often we get caught up in the race for credits and resume builders.

In a recent New York Times article by Frank Bruni entitled, “How to get the most out of college,” he argues that by “by sticking to predetermined scripts, sweating perfection and avoiding risks...students aren’t learning to stumble and to right themselves.” Bruni introduces us to Eric Johnson who works at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Johnson argues that, “The more you regard college as a credentialing exercise, the less likely you are to get the benefits.” The wisest students, he said seize leadership roles, serve as research assistants, and realize “that above all else, they’re in college to widen the circle of human beings who know you and care about you.” We might say the inverse is also true, “to widen the circle of human beings who you know and care about.”

I encourage you not to get too caught up in the “credentialing exercise.” To whom, and to what, might you open your eyes this year? How will you seize upon the opportunities this year to push your comfort zones and build real relationships with individuals - students, professors and mentors - who will help you discover magnificent beauty in parts of the world that you have not yet explored, as well as invite you to alleviate the incredible pain that is prevalent in so many parts of our planet.

This High Holiday season in which we celebrate the Birthday of the world, let us allow the sound of the shofar to wake us up and help us reflect on how we can re-align ourselves with our deepest values and sensibilities. Let ourselves be open to the compassionate curiosity that is so necessary in this moment.

I would like to leave you with the words of My teacher, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

- On Being Caught in the Thicket

The ram's horn is silent at first
As is the ram.
Caught in the thicket,
Waiting for Abraham to lift his head and see,
It appears at the last minute,
Out of nowhere,
When it's almost too late.

Of course, it was there all along.
Since twilight
On the eve of the first Shabbat, we are told.
It was there before darkness fell.
(We barely knew what darkness was then.)

It was there all along.
Waiting for us to open our eyes.
Waiting for us to see another way.
It's not just our stubbornness that blinds us.
Sometimes it's the commanding voice of faith.
Sometimes it's the commanding voice of despair.
And sometimes it's the thicket itself.
The thorny, tangled overgrowth of our lives.

It's not that we're blind,
We're just busy.
Schlepping the wood,
Tending the fire,
Building the altar,
Trying to quiet the children—

Trying to answer their questions—

Even though God knows
We can't answer our own.

Up until the angel calls out, and Abraham looks up, up until the ram suddenly appears, caught in the thicket, the trajectory of the story—the tragic momentum of the story—seems irresistible, irreversible, inevitable. The sacrifice has to be offered. The child will have to die.

This is the power of the ram's horn. It beckons us back to this moment in the story. No longer silent, it calls us back to the ram from which it came and asks us:

Think about the thicket of your own life. What possibilities have you not seen? Think about a story you are telling yourself – whose outcome you think you already know. What alternatives have you not noticed? And think about the path we are all on together. The altars at the end of the road. The children we love but seem prepared to sacrifice.

Look up. Listen.
Incline your heart, your ear

To the hollow, bent ram's horn
Through which human breath becomes a summons
and a blast.

What might we hear? How might we respond?

- Shanah Tova