

RH 1 AM 5775

If the Torah has a hero, it is Moses. He is the focal point of four of the Torah's five books. We meet him when he is born and we say a sad farewell at his death. Tradition traces virtually every one of our holidays back to something that happened on his watch.

Virtually every one of our holidays, that is, except for this one. Today and tomorrow we focus on Abraham. Abraham whom we do not meet until he is seventy five years old, Abraham whom we accompany for only a dozen chapters in Genesis.

But it is Abraham whom God calls to establish His people; it is Abraham who is the first Jew. God called to Abraham, and Abraham responded. His response was simple, but as we learn, Abraham himself was anything but.

We live in an age of the absolute. Our unraveling world seems filled with those utterly confident in their own rightness. Look around. Far from our shores, and in our own backyard, we see no shortage of individuals and groups combative and aggressive in support of a political or social cause, and favoring violent, confrontational and extreme methods.

We are in an age of Islamic militancy: Hamas, to be sure, but even more so ISIS and Boko Haram. Consider Boko Haram. Thousands of innocents killed, and what of the hundreds of kidnapped Nigerian girls about to be sold into slavery? All because this understanding of Islam demands such action? Could there be a clearer example of absolutism? A cause that justifies anything?

That is an obvious, horrible example. But let us continue. The term is more pliant than we may realize.

There is no institution less respected in this country than Congress. Its members appear incapable of agreement on anything, and equally incapable of the negotiation and flexibility and good will needed to achieve things. Most of us recognize that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. But not Congress. Its members, as a body, are absolutists.

Consider this: In the 2012 elections, six of every seven House members were elected with at least 55 percent of the vote, two thirds were elected by super majorities of 60 percent or higher, and one in five won by at least 75 percent of the vote.

Six of every seven Congressman sits in a safe seat. Their reelection requires effort, they have to work at it, but it's not really a challenge. What motivation do they have to listen to the other side, to work with the other side, to come up with ways so that progress can be made? Pretty much none. Years ago I saw some graffiti I liked a lot outside Lincoln Center. It read, "They are so convinced of their own worth, that mistakes become a form of self-expression." I have met few elected officials not convinced of their own rectitude; their mere presence makes Congress a better place. Why should they bend? Yet their approval rating is far lower than that of President Obama. And that says a lot.

We look elsewhere. The debate over abortion rights is a complex and heated one. I am sure we here have divergent views, and I respect those with whom I disagree, and my issue is not with that disagreement per se. I echo a sentiment of Bill Clinton while President, when he said that abortion should be, quote, available, safe and rare, and that is the concept that the American public has by and large supported.

Yet the Pro-Life movement has engaged in militant efforts for years, from the killing of doctors by its most extreme partisans to the harassment of clinic patients to, last year, a new strategy unveiled in Texas: Texas Senate Bill 5 required clinics to meet the same standards as ambulatory care centers and required the clinic doctors to have privileges at nearby hospitals. There is no earthly medical reason why that was necessary. This was purely an end run around the system. I know I am absolutely right. No question. Anyone who does not agree is not only wrong, but bad. The law is evil, so I will fabricate another law to negate it. Is this the way we want things to be?

The word obviously has different shades of meaning in different contexts. If I am an absolutist for the Jets, there is no harm in that. It might be futile...but we know that is not the kind of absolutism of which we speak.

We Jews have a problem here. Our origins go back to those scrolls from which we read, our sacred text, the source, we say, of not only what we **are**, but what we are to take **important**. And in the Torah reading that begins today and we finish tomorrow, we read perhaps the most absolutist story of all.

It begins with the words, "God tested Abraham." God calls out to Abraham and says take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go with him to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there. Abraham does not delay. He rises early the next morning, leaves with Isaac and two servants, and travels for three days. He comes to the place of which God spoke. He tells the servants to remain; he and Isaac climb the mountain. Once atop Abraham binds Isaac to wood they had brought, raises the knife in his hand, and prepares to make the sacrifice God demanded.

At the last possible moment an angel of God cries out Avraham, Avraham, and Abraham replies, "Here I am." God then explains that Abraham need not slay the boy, that God now knows that Abraham is loyal, that Abraham is utterly and totally and infallibly loyal to God. His fealty is absolute.

In other words, Abraham passed the test. In other words, Abraham, just because God said so, was willing to kill his own son. What could be more absolute than that? How can we possibly accept that idea?

We find a clue in something that happened just a short time earlier. Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember the terrible, sinful populations of those two cities? Filled with degeneracy and hate? God found them beyond redemption. They would only spiral ever more downward in horribleness. They had to be destroyed lest they contaminate the rest of the earth.

God tells this to Abraham. And Abraham has a strange reaction. He says to God, if there are fifty innocent people there, will you refrain from destroying the cities. God agrees. For the sake of fifty I will not destroy. Abraham continues, if there are forty innocent people there, will you refrain from destroying the cities? Again, God agrees. This continues until God draws the line at ten.

As we know, there are not ten innocent people, and God does destroy the cities. But what is intriguing, and unfathomable, is this. When it comes to people he has

never met, whose cause no one has asked him to concern himself with, Abraham gives his all to protect them. But when God asks him to slay his own son, Abraham cannot move fast enough.

How to reconcile all this? A week ago last night, I had an insight.

Jim Goodman, a history professor at Rutgers Newark, published a book this year entitled, *But Where is the Lamb*, a chronicle of the interpretations and traditions associated with the binding of Isaac in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Professor Clement Price, Newark's unofficial historian laureate and a good friend of Temple B'nai Abraham, invited me, a local Imam, and the head of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, to form a panel to discuss the book with Professor Goodman.

The book was fascinating. I was familiar, of course, with the diverse ways in which Judaism has viewed the story, including the propositions that Abraham indeed sacrificed Isaac, or that Isaac himself encouraged the sacrifice, or that Sarah was really the one who kept it from happening. But the session reinforced how central the story was to both Christianity and Islam. My fellow panelists and I shared opinions, we disagreed with one another, we offered alternative explanations...in short, we had a great time. We did not agree but we listened. Our understandings were not the same, but they were given credence. Our gathering meant something.

The session was drawing to an end, and then something hit me, which I shared with those gathered. It was a warm encounter, and I realized that I had more in common with these two fellows, than I had with militants, the absolutists, of my own community. Last Sunday's paper had an article about a haredi neighborhood in London where signs in English and Yiddish directed on which side of the street woman could walk. That is a foreign world.

The imam and the minister looked at me. They nodded. We could engage in conversation; we could listen. There was of course much on which we would not agree. I gave the Imam all sorts of grief for not being more vocal about Islamic militancy and he of course brought up the settlements; but we could argue with respect, and we did. And to use an old fashioned but lovely word Clem Price summed things up with, there was fellowship in the air, and it felt good.

Abraham was indeed tested, but the test had two parts. Abraham passed the first part. But he failed the second. The first part, Sodom and Gomorrah. God exposed Abraham to a potentially horrific injustice. Abraham took the bait, and went toe to toe with God. God was pleased.

The second part of the test occurred on Mount Moriah. God gave Abraham a ludicrous command, hoping that Abraham, even though the command came directly from God, would say, "Slay my own son? Really?" Alas maybe Abraham was heady with being the one God chose as the first Jew, and he readily agreed to whatever God wanted. Abraham was eager to be far more of a militant than God desired.

And here is the proof.

The Torah tells us about an unusual type of Israelite, one called a *nazir*, a Nazirite. Anyone can become a Nazirite. One simply takes a vow to live as a Nazirite, then follows the commandments reserved for them.

1. Never drink wine, or eat or drink anything fermented.
2. Never cut one's hair.
3. Never become ritually impure by contact with the dead, or even burial grounds.

Nazirites live by onerous commandments. Their lives are strictly controlled. It is a serious, severe, flagellated path. We might think, oh my, what special people, what holy, committed sorts, how much God must delight in their piety, their strength, their desire to be close to the Divine. We should be like them.

Actually...not. They're not that big a deal. How do we know? God tells us.

The text about the Nazirites is placed smack in the middle of the book of Numbers without introduction, and it ends the same way, without comment. The rules are given, but nowhere does the Torah say that this is something God desires, or respects, or accords special merit. Nowhere does the Torah say this is a good thing. Nowhere, in fact, does the Torah say why the Nazirites even exist. God

does not appear to disapprove but nor does he appear to approve. From which there is only one logical conclusion: God doesn't care.

If a Nazirite becomes a Nazirite he or she is not doing it because God wants them to. He or she is doing it because they want to. Think about the annoying kid in your eighth grade social studies class who already had a 99 average...and asked the teacher for an extra credit assignment.

Consider it positive extremism. If you feel the need for yourself, if it makes you feel good, go ahead. But don't think you are impressing me. And especially, don't impose it on me.

I am a moderate by nature. A radical centrist. I am often doomed to sympathize with both sides of an argument. After a lifetime spent studying and teaching Jewish texts, I suspect that is no accident. Moses' father in law Jethro was a critical source of support and advice to Moses. Jethro was a Gentile, and the Talmud teaches us this means that wisdom can come from anywhere. No one individual or group has a monopoly. I suppose that is why I was able to enjoy the panel discussion the other night and feel more connected to my fellow panelists than I might to the ultra-Orthodox Jew from London who considers it his right sacred right to tell women where they can or cannot walk, or an extremist West Bank settler who believes his right to live anywhere he wants supersedes any civil law.

The Torah teaches us that absolutism is good and right in certain circumstances: rachameem, tzedakah, gemliut hasadeem: compassion, generosity, good deeds. But we are to be wary of those so convinced of their own rightness that they are beyond judgment.

That is certainly the case with ISIS. I hope and pray that our leaders find a way to deal with this evil. I do not know if military intervention is the path to follow, and I am mindful that two wonderful young men from our congregational family, Jared Greenberg and Ethan Cooperstein, are in uniform. We praise their service, but their parents do not want to see them in harm's way and neither do we.

However, the ISIS cancer threatens not just the Middle East, and Israel, but the world. Should our involvement benefit the cause, we cannot stand idly by.

President Obama spoke with passion and urgency at the United Nations yesterday and we need the international coalition he is attempting to form. It may be that force is the only strategy understood. ISIS is absolute by conviction.

But what of those who become absolute...because they can? Who can largely do whatever they want because there are no consequences. Six of every seven congressmen sit in a safe seat. What possible motivation do they have to work productively to get done what could be done? None. If they follow the straight and narrow, they are reelected. Isn't that what it is all about?

My dream, every ten years, the census makes us reconsider the map. When reapportionment is necessary, a team of nonpartisan mathematicians, relying solely upon geometry and statistical analysis, creates districts that are geographically coherent and demographically representative. The number of safe seats will plummet. Congressmen will have to perform their duties in ways they currently do not, proving their effectiveness, their productivity, to a more diverse constituency than before. Put differently, congressmen would have to talk to one another, and work with one another, in a way they have not done for a long time.

When God threatened to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham engaged. He argued, he used reason and passion and eloquence and he swayed God. And God was pleased. And when Abraham readily agreed to slay Isaac, God was sad. He liked the first Abraham better.

We have both Abrahams inside us. We are often tempted, and it is often comfortable and easy and self-righteously satisfying, to follow the party line, go with the flow, seek approval from peers and those in authority, and think of ourselves as doing what we are supposed to do. And in a world that at times seems to be unravelling, in which we at times feel impotent, that is so, so tempting.

But God wants us to be the other Abraham, the one who challenges, who engages, who thinks for himself. The Abraham, who takes all that God had taught him, and uses that to make up his own mind and his own conscience and understand for himself what is right and what is wrong, and acts upon it.

This year, let us resolve to be the Abraham God wants us to be. Amen.