

RH 1 AM 5772

*After Abraham and God begin to get to know one another, the Torah tells us there is something on God's mind. Something big. Something troubling. Something that, in the words of our Torah, God is not sure He should share with Abraham. God gives the matter some thought. And then he takes the plunge. And he tells Abraham something about two cities...Sodom and Gomorrah.*

President Obama is an unpopular leader these days. Gallup puts his approval rating at 38%. That is low. Perhaps irretrievably so. On the other hand, it is not the lowest approval rating Gallup has seen. Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Harry Truman...and quite a few others were at some point lower.

Still a 38% approval rating is not great, and I cannot imagine that President Obama feels good about it...except, of course, when he compares himself to Congress. In a recent poll the AP determined that Congress' approval rating is 12%. Twelve per cent.

Only three of every twenty five of us believe that Congress is doing a good job. And that cuts across party lines. And not only across party lines, but for the first time the AP says voters are beginning to feel that way strongly about their own representatives. Not just the other guy. This is not ideology. This is something different.

Quote: "It is a great honor for me to be here with you today, to talk about a man I have so much regard for. So much reverence for, with whom I've done battle for 33 years and have enjoyed every minute of it, like two fighting brothers, to be honest with you. I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about this man, my friend."

Do you know these words? They were spoken by Sen. Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah and possessor of a perfect 100 rating from the American Conservative Union. The words come from his eulogy for his beloved friend Senator Ted Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, whose ACU rating was probably less than 100.

Hatch went on. "Teddy was already a giant among senators. I stated numerous times on the campaign trail that I plan to come to Washington to fight Ted Kennedy. When I came to Washington, I hadn't the slightest idea that I would eventually have a strong working relationship with and love for the man that I came to fight. And if you would have told me that he would become one of my closest friends in the world, I probably would have suggested you need professional help. But that's exactly what happened."

Loving words, spoken a little over two years ago. At the time, they were so very moving. Today, they seem inconceivable.

*God is not happy with these two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. He tells Abraham, "tzakat s'dom v'amora kee raba the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave, I will go down to see if what I have heard is true." And if it is, God goes on, he will destroy the cities, and all their inhabitants.*

*Abraham listens carefully. He thinks before responding.*

We seem take it as a given that to stand up for what one believes is a good thing. That to be true to one's principles is a good thing. That to stand fast in the face of opposition is a good thing. But is it always so?

On June 11, 1963 Democratic Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama. He attempted to block the entrance of Vivian Malone Jones and James Hood, who would be the first black students at the university. In the wake of Brown vs. The Board of Education, Wallace had promised his state, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever."

As he stood in that campus doorway, Wallace went nose to nose with Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. Katzenbach informed Wallace that if he did not step aside, National Guard soldiers, hundreds of whom were present, would move him aside. Wallace remained in place for a few moments, and only when the only two options were move or be moved, did he step aside.

George Wallace knew what he believed. George Wallace, was a man of principle. George Wallace stood up. Do any of us admire what he did at that moment?

Jewish tradition has its own example of such standing up, such sticking to principle. We call him, Pharaoh. Ten times, Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Ten times, Pharaoh says "no." Ten times God sends plagues upon Pharaoh and Egypt: hail, locusts, blood, boils, the death of the first born. Ten times, Pharaoh says "no." All Egypt suffers; Pharaoh's own noblemen beg him, "let this people go!" Pharaoh says, no.

George Wallace knew he could not prevail in Tuscaloosa that day. He knew what the outcome would be. He could have been gracious...even grudgingly so, and helped make the inevitable unfold in his state in a climate of, if not, joy, then at least acceptance. Instead, he missed an opportunity. His defiance in the face of certain defeat only kept the waters of Alabama's ship of state roiling, a plague for decades to come.

Pharaoh cared not for his nation. He cared not for his people. He cared only for himself and his vision of himself, and what he believed to be right. We know what happened to him.

*Abraham says to God, "What if I find 50 innocent people in these cities? Will you still destroy them if there are 50 innocent people there?" God considers Abraham's questions. "Very well," he says, "for the sake of the fifty I will not destroy the cities." Abraham waits a moment. He takes a deep breath. "What if there are forty innocent people there, will you still destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?" A long pause. God says, "for the sake of the forty, Lo e-a-se ba-a-vur ha-ar-ba-eem I will not destroy the cities." Abraham sighs with relief.*

We are, it seems, right now, these days – in a moment where to hold an opinion means not to bend...period. Where more and more the only approach to public discourse is not merely to criticize, but utterly to deny the other side...even if there are things with which one agrees.

In his column this past Sunday, Tom Friedman gave voice to the frustration many feel. The Republicans from the outset have vowed to stymie the President's attempt to do just about anything, even that with which they do not necessarily disagree. It is all about curtailing his power. That is the goal. Not, what can we realistically do in the here and now to make things as good as possible for everyone.

And as Friedman also notes, Mr. Obama is not blameless, walking away from the recommendations of the bipartisan Simpson Bowles deficit reduction commission, a commission that he appointed! The commission's recommendations are terrible...except that they are also probably necessary. Everyone knows there is no long term fix except one that will involve a good deal of pain. Everyone knows that. Why is facing that so difficult?

We are creatures that do not bend easily. With think it is a sign of weakness. We genuinely think that to give an inch is to give a mile. We like to be strong.

In my pre Temple B'nai Abraham days, I used to have a boss. One boss. (Okay. Perhaps two.) Today I have roughly, including children, oh, three thousand or so. One boss is easier. And this boss taught me a lesson I try to remember every day, a lesson especially meaningful during this Yamim Noraim, these sacred days. Two words that should roll off anyone's lips more easily than any others, two words that should simply emerge from our mouths whenever appropriate, "I'm sorry."

He was not cynical. All of us occasionally do things for which we should be sorry. And when we do, we should say so. All of us resist saying these words. No one relishes admitting they were wrong. But here's the point: once someone sincerely says, I'm sorry...what comes next?

Nothing. You go on. There are other important things to do. Unless you let it, it does not affect your standing in the slightest.

*Abraham continues. "What if I find thirty innocent people? Will you destroy the cities for the sake of the thirty?" God responds, "for the sake of thirty I will not destroy the cities." Abraham plowed forward, "What if I find twenty innocent people? Will you destroy the cities for the sake of the twenty?" God responds, "For the sake of the twenty I will not destroy the cities."*

How did we get here? We know a lot of it. Parties held hostage by an outer flank. Congressional districts redrawn in bizarre shapes that are anything but random. Elected officials who have no choice but to spend all their time raising money. Elected positions in Washington that become lifelong gigs. And for those who leave, incredibly lucrative

opportunities afterward...for fun sometime, check up online how many former public officials are making frightening amounts of money in Washington as paid advocates of one kind or another.

A friend used to work for one of the large investment banks, in a group that focused on very, very large deals – power plants, and other enormous infrastructure projects - that would normally take several years from inception to completion. Depending upon where individual deals stood, the group could be doing outstanding work...yet not have a dime in revenue in a given year. The problem? Bonuses were paid annually. The bank only asked, what did you do for me this year? It is called myopia. Short sightedness.

We want those who serve on our behalf to make good decisions for the long term. Yet the system rewards them for the short term. We expect from them a judiciousness and a wisdom and a nuance...which right now seems frighteningly lacking. I used to oppose term limits...now I'm not so sure.

*Abraham gave it one more shot. He spoke slowly to God. V'eem esser? "What if there are ten innocent people in the cities? Will you destroy the cities for the sake of the ten?" God's pauses had gotten longer before each answer. Now he was silent for a long, long time. To Abraham it seemed an eternity. Finally God spoke. "No," God said, "for the sake of the ten I will not destroy the cities."*

We know what happens next. A search ensues. One can only imagine the vigor with which it was conducted. Yet ten innocent people cannot be found. God sends forth fire. It engulfs Sodom and Gomorra, destroying everything. Many of us have visited the spot on the western shore of the Dead Sea where the cities are said to have existed. It is a barren, salty, utterly lifeless place. Imagining the cataclysm of Biblical times is not difficult.

When we Jews study this passage of the Torah, we tend to focus on the Abraham side of the equation. How compassionate he was! How insightful! How brave he was to confront God on a matter of morality! A thousand years ago Maimonides wrote, "It is better and more satisfactory to acquit a thousand guilty persons than to put a single innocent one to death." Surely Abraham was before him when he wrote those words.

But in these days, I cannot help but wonder if we have the point of the story all wrong. Let us examine the other side of the dialogue. Let's look at God.

God says, "I am going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Abraham says, "Wait. What if I find 50 innocent people?"

God says, "Hmm. Good point. Okay, in that case I will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah."

Abraham says....we know what Abraham says. All the way down to ten.

We look at God. The Divine. The Eternal. The All Knowing. The All Powerful.

God says, "I am going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah!"

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God says, "Hmm. Good point. Okay, in that case I will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah."

God listened to Abraham. God was God and Abraham a mere man yet God thought Abraham had a good point and God changed His mind. And what happened when God changed his mind? Nothing. Nothing happened. He was still God, Adonai, the maker of the covenant with Abraham, the liberator of our people from Egypt. His profile was not lowered, his reputation not tarnished, his authority not diminished. Nor, we imagine, was his ego damaged.

We live in frightening times. We crave wisdom, we pray for reassurance, yet we are concerned about those from whom we expect such things. When did the definition of victory become the other side not getting what it wants?

The Torah presents us with the lives of people, who lived real lives, people who were profound yet petty, insightful yet insipid, generous yet small. People, just like any other people. And despite the reality of their humanness, as we are taught this morning, things could get done. As long as both sides truly wanted that to happen. As long as both sides cared about the common good.

This cherished, holy, 5,000 year old narrative picks us up by the scruff of our collective neck and forces us to see that so often, so often, more than anything, paralysis is the product of lack of will, as is the case in our great nation today.

We call upon those who serve on our behalf. Get over yourselves. Worry about what we need you to worry about. Do not let some smug and misguided sense of ideological purity, or especially ego, be an obstacle. Be whom we need you to be. Talk. And listen. And be willing to bend.

God spoke. Abraham challenged. God listened. And God bent toward Abraham. And when he did so not only was he still God. Because he did so, we love him all the more.

Shanna Tova.