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*Many years ago there lived a man named Abram. He would later be called Abraham. He lived in a place called Haran, the land where his father and his father's fathers, had dwelt. We know little about Abraham. We know that he had vast flocks of sheep and goats. We know that he had a beautiful wife. We know how old he was. And we know that one day, God called out to him.*

Last week I visited with the members of the Temple B'nai Abraham seniors group, which meets here each Monday. We discussed the holidays. We discussed our families. And we discussed politics. The conventions had just taken place and the subject was front and center for us all. I asked, as you step into the voting booth this year...what's going to be on your mind? As you decide for whom to vote, what are the things you are most concerned about; the things that will most influence your decision.

Medicare. Medicare. Social Security. Did I mention Medicare? These were not the only answers. But they were the first to be uttered by just about everyone.

I thought about that for a while. Then I started asking the same question among peers of mine. The same general themes cropped up: the economy. Taxes. The economy. Employment. Taxes. Again, these were not the only answers, but they were by far the most common.

Then I took my fieldwork to a college campus, specifically, to the University of California at Berkeley where I have a personal correspondent. I gave my correspondent there just the one question to ask. And what did he find? Jobs. Student loans. Student loans. The economy. Jobs.

Granted, this research is utterly and completely unscientific. But I wonder nonetheless.

*We do not know the circumstances surrounding God's call to Abraham. Perhaps Abraham was working in the field one day, conferring with his overseers, discussing the grain market for the season ahead. On the other hand, the call probably came when he was alone, so perhaps he had finished work for the day and inspected a newborn calf or two. Perhaps he was on his solitary way back to the tent, and dinner with Sarah, when God spoke.*

When you leave the Sanctuary at the end of the service, please look to the right. As you do, you will see the American flag that always stands there. I ask that you take special note of the flag today, because in another few days it will not be here. It will be far away.

Major Robert Movshin, the grandson of our member Mae Movshin and a relative of many other members, kindly offered to have our flag flown for a day over his base in Afghanistan. The flag will be returned to us, with an official letter from the base commander, noting that the flag had served, and been honored, in this fashion.

Rather than temporarily remove the empty flagpole, it will remain in place for a number of weeks. I hope it will serve as a reminder to us of those who serve on our behalf far, far away. Those who put themselves in harm's way on a daily basis. Let's be honest. How often do we think of them? How many of us realize that nearly 7,000 of our fellow citizens gave their lives for us in Iraq and Afghanistan? No one in my straw polls brought them up. And for how many, if any, of us will they be at the front, or even toward the front, of our thoughts as we decide for whom to vote.

Of all the issues floating around at the moment, were we to choose the one of greatest consequence to our children's children, and their children, and their children...it might well be climate change. As evidence mounts, scientists are growing louder. Skeptics are growing quieter. The trends are scary. The ever increasing amounts of greenhouse gasses have had real, measurable and increasing consequences.

The bad news is, scientists announced the surface area of sea ice in the Arctic had fallen to the lowest level since records began. The good news is futures of ocean front property are getting cheaper. A recent editorial from the American Association for the Advancement of Science says it quite simply: "if you get the feeling lately that whenever it rains, it pours, you're right."

Rising temperatures led to this year's drought which is one reason food is now more expensive. MIT - a stellar institution with many equally stellar graduates among us today - recently released a study projecting a 50/50 chance that the average earth temperature will rise at least 9 degrees by the end of the century.

And again, for how many of us will all this be at the front of our minds, or even near the front, when we step into the voting booth?

*God's message to Abraham was straightforward. With Abraham, a new people would come into being, a people of God, a people of Adonai. And Abraham was to lead them. He would have children, they would have children, and, God promised, the people would eventually be as numerous as the stars in the sky, as numerous as the grains of sand beside the sea. According to our Torah, the initial exchange was short. God said, "go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." Abraham said, "okay."*

*But here's what's weird. If Abraham had been thinking logically, "okay" was the last thing he should have said.*

Mitt Romney is a great man. He is accomplished, bold and passionate about what he believes. But I believe he has made a tragic error in how has chosen to run his campaign. Should there be anyone here intimate with him, I urge you pass on what I am about to say.

Governor Romney is a Mormon. Everyone knows that. And everyone clearly knows that his campaign has downplayed his Mormon identity. Not deny it of

course but...be low key about it. And I think that is wrong. The governor should mention his Mormon faith at every possible opportunity. I think he should put on a Superman style uniform with a big M across his chest. I love and admire Mormons, and so should you.

Every young Mormon spends two years as a missionary. Governor Romney was in France as a young man. I saw plenty of these young missionaries when I lived in Brazil. They are literally all over the world. Every young Mormon is expected to devote himself or herself to two years of service. They don't get college credit for it. Aside from perhaps learning a language, it is not a time of acquiring new skills or new knowledge for the future. They spend many days getting doors closed in their faces.

In other words, 19-20-21 year old Mormons give up two years of their lives for something that is, essentially, of no practical benefit to them. I cannot help comparing what they do to the programs that have abounded in recent years, providing service opportunities to aspiring college students seeking to beef up an application. Habitat for Humanity in Hawaii is not quite the same thing.

In a couple of months, yet another group from Temple B'nai Abraham will head to Israel, to discover the land anew, from the Negev to the Galilee, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea. We will visit Jerusalem and climb Masada and do all the things one is supposed to do and it will be great and it will be moving and it will be memorable.

But it may well be that among the most memorable moments, is the lunch we will have with what in Israel are called "lone soldiers." These are Jewish young men and woman who are not Israeli, and whose families do not live in Israel. These young Jews have chosen to give up a year and a half or two or three years to serve in the Israeli army. Their dedication and commitment is inspiring...but even more so is, well, their time.

They give those years to the state of Israel. And again, the cold hard reality is...they basically get nothing in return. Like regular Israelis, college gets pushed off, the start of adult lives and careers is delayed. Like with the Mormon missionaries, they give up years of their lives for something that is, essentially, of no practical benefit to them. How odd.

*And odd is the word we could use to describe Abraham's response to God. An intelligent Abraham, a sensible Abraham, a realistic Abraham, would have replied: "No. thank you!" Abraham was wealthy, at age 75 Abraham had a beautiful wife, Abraham was prominent in a community where he had deep and ancient roots. What possible reason could he have for responding to God, "okay?"*

In the August 30<sup>th</sup> *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks described what he believes one of the most potent forces in American life today: hyperindividualism, the doctrine that the individual is all important; the doctrine that unfettered individual opportunity, choice and autonomy reign supreme. The frequent invocation of Ayn Rand only underscores this trend. *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* are seen as the most American of American literature, exaltations of the American spirit.

What Brooks identifies is real. But it is nothing new. The tension between the human and humanity, between the person and the people, between the individual and the community, has been with us for a very long time. And I believe it is every bit as ominous today as it was way back then.

In the book of Vayikra, Leviticus, in that stunning section known as the Holiness Code, we read one of the most stirring passages in all sacred literature:

"At harvest time you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather its fallen fruit. You shall leave it for the poor and the stranger. I the Lord am your God."

Lovely words? Absolutely. But, if we know how to read them, they are not just lovely. They are earth shattering.

These words occur in Leviticus, which means they were spoken just after our ancestors left Egypt. Egypt, at this point, is only weeks, perhaps only days, behind them. These words were spoken at the instant our ancestors were freed from 400 years of slavery, servitude, domination, and deprivation. This is among the very first things God says to the people?

It is not only that God says this to the people. It is a commandment! God is not suggesting to the people this is something they should do. God commands the people, at the earliest moment he possibly could, that whatever they have, they must to share it with the poor. Using precisely the same language by which the God commands the people Thou shalt not murder, Thou shalt not lie, Thou shalt not commit adultery...the people are here commanded, we are here commanded...though shalt share with those who have less.

There is only one possible explanation. This was something so important, so essential, so utterly Jewish, that God could not leave it to the whims of the people if they would choose to do this, God introduce this instruction with the utterly unambiguous terms, you must.

*Abraham responded to God, "okay," because Abraham realized something wonderful, and loving, and meaningful. All his life, he had done nothing bad...but he was not sure he had done anything good. He enriched himself, he had a wonderful marriage, he enjoyed the respect and admiration of those around him. But when God unrolled the Torah before him, and showed Abraham all it contained, Abraham recognized that his life, which he had considered so successful, was lacking. There was so much more he could do, so much more he could achieve, so much more of an impact to be had. And so when God called to Abraham, it was with certainty, and anticipation, and excitement that he responded, "okay."*

Each of us, has a natural inclination to care first about ourselves and those closest to us. This is not only natural. It is right. And our Torah understood that when its pages became populated with strong, successful people whose sense of worth was without question: Moses, King David, and of course, Abraham. The Mishnah, our first law code, reminds us, if I am not for me who will be?

But we are better than that. As the Mishnah continues, if I am only for myself, what am I? And that, for the Jew, is perhaps the most fundamental question at this moment of the year: am I only for myself?

The lone soldier in Israel, the young Mormon missionary, the American who volunteers to put on a uniform and put his life on the line. They are not only for themselves. Those who take seriously and act upon the challenges of climate change, poverty, discrimination. They are not only for themselves. When we give tzedaka and feel it, when we donate our time and feel it, when we contribute our energy and feel it...that is the moment when we are not only for ourselves. That is the moment when we embrace the path Abraham so whole-heartedly chose, that is the moment we earn and deserve the name *b'nei avraham*, Children of Abraham.

A year has ended. A new year begins. While much changes, much remains the same. Each of us has gifts to share with the world. May we never forget that we are *bnei avraham*; may we always deserve that blessing, which he bequeathed to us.

Shana tova.