

**TORAH READING
FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH**

**Introducing
Avraham and Sarah
In Beth Abraham:
The House Called By Their
Names**

Rosh Hashanah 5775

First Aliyah

Adonai remembered Sarah. In the Torah narrative, God had sent three messengers to visit Sarah and Avraham to tell them that a son would be born to Sarah “at a season of life.” Much has happened since then, including God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities filled with evil; and a famine that forced Avraham and Sarah to flee to the land of the Philistines. While we would assume Sarah has been present and pregnant through most or all of this, only now does the Torah say that *Adonai remembered Sarah.* Perhaps this represents Sarah's perspective, a feeling that now she is once again in God's field of vision, so to speak.

- Does Rosh Hashanah give you a feeling of being in “God's field of vision” in a way you haven't seemed before? What in the past year has moved you away from that? What do you do, or could you do, to make this time of year a “season of life”?

Second Aliyah

Laugh. What is the sound of Sarah's laugh? Is it the joyful laugh of having a new child? The nervous laugh of the most unusual mother in the neighborhood, worried about the stares of others or her strength to raise a new baby? Does she feel that others share her laughter, laugh with her?

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian... We judge Sarah harshly for what she asks, and Avraham too for standing silently. Why doesn't he argue with God, as he did to save the strangers of Sodom and Gomorrah? The Torah lets us see Sarah and Avraham struggling to integrate their many responsibilities, to the very different people who make up their family and their household, and to one another.

- What makes you give up, or nearly give up, in your personal relationships? When have you spoken up, and when have you been silent?

Third Aliyah

God heard the voice of the boy... Yet in the previous verse, it was his mother Hagar who lifted up her voice. It was when she gave her voice on behalf of another who was in danger of his life that he was heard. Jewish tradition regards a wordless cry or scream as a kind of faith. As long as we cry out, are not dulled to our own pain or that of others, we have the possibility of hope.

- What cry, on your own behalf or someone else's, have you been trying to give voice to?

Fourth Aliyah

Avraham's dealings with Avimelech, king of the Philistines, and his military leader Phichol, seem unrelated to the story of family we have just read. Yet events in the larger world often echo and clarify questions in our own personal lives. Even today, the debate about war in Syria raises very familiar questions about behavior, motivations, and consequences that come up in our families, workplaces, and other settings. In our reactions to our leaders, we can find clues to themes in our own lives that are worth exploring.

Fifth Aliyah

He planted an 'eshel' in Be'er Sheva, and called there in the name of Adonai, God of time and space. One midrash sees Avraham here in a path of *teshuvah*, healing from his actions toward Hagar and Yishmael. It reads the Hebrew word *eshel* not literally as a tamarisk tree, but as an acronym for *achila, shtiya, l'vaya* – providing food, drink, and an escort into the wilderness for anyone passing through this desert oasis. These were exactly what Avraham had not done for his family, and he stays in Be'er Sheva *many days*, years perhaps. Maimonides defines *teshuvah* as finding oneself in the same situation or a parallel one, and acting differently. Here, according to the midrash, Avraham lives with potential enemies, and challenges himself to act in a way fitting for one identified with God.

TORAH READING SECOND DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH

First Aliyah

And it was, after these things, that God tested Avraham. The test of the *Akedah* presents a moral dilemma to Avraham on many levels. He has obligations, to God and to Yitzchak. There is the question of authority, which Avraham has faced before when he challenged God about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. There is the question of his responsibility to Sarah, whom he chooses not to tell about God's demand. There is a spiritual dilemma as well, as Avraham has to integrate what he believes he is hearing with his confidence in the future that God has promised him.

- A dilemma is a test when conflicting loyalties or values are at stake. What is the most serious dilemma you have faced in the past year, or that awaits you this year?

Second Aliyah

On the third day... From early on the first day through a second day, the Torah records no conversation at all among the travelers: Avraham, Yitzchak, and the two servants. On the third day, Avraham and Yitzchak each speak. Each sentence leaves us wondering: In what tone was it said? What was spoken, what was unspoken, what was understood, what was too difficult to say? When Yitzchak says, *My father*, Avraham answers: *Hineni b'ni* – *Here I am, my son*, answering Yitzchak almost exactly as he had answered God at the outset of the story. What do the two *Here I am* responses mean?

Third Aliyah

From two days' walk in a single verse, the narrative slows to a crawl on top of the mountain. Perhaps Avraham's mind rebelled, as ours does, at the thought that he would actually go through with the sacrifice of his son. Many midrashim and chasidic interpreters see these verses as an emotional metaphor, for the most narrow escape from a seemingly impossible predicament. Both Yitzchak and Avraham are pulled from the brink at the final moment. In this kind of reading, the Akedah is not a test sent from God, but a playing out of the most difficult tests in our lives, when it seems there is no answer that doesn't harm someone. How can we live with integrity when faced with that kind of choice?

Fourth Aliyah

For I will bless, indeed bless you, and multiply, yes multiply your descendents like the stars of the sky... This promise sounds different from the same promise given to Avraham when he was first called by God. Surely this reward is not his motive for following God's path, even if it is the result. Of course, Avraham's reward here is not in his own lifetime, but something that will continue toward the future.

- We don't (hopefully) live well in order to be rewarded. But what does it mean to you to experience the “rewards”, or not to see them? Have you ever thought of your own life as the reward of someone else's life, perhaps far back beyond the generations you knew personally?

Fifth Aliyah

And it was, after these things, that Avraham was told: See, Milcah has also borne children to Nachor, your brother. Eight children, plus four more from their concubine Re'umah! The *also* is quite a comment. Avraham risks everything to follow God, and only after all his difficulties his heir remains. Nachor stays behind, presumably in old places living old ways, and has twelve children (like the Israelites!), and then his granddaughter Rivkah, the partner for Yitzchak. Two paths, so different, converging on the same place at the end of the brothers' lives?

- Why is Avraham's path worthwhile? What makes his risks and his faith worthwhile, when he might have made other choices?

The First Call and the Original Mission: Genesis 12

Adonai said to Avram: Go, you, from your land and from your birthplace and from the house of your father, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great – and be a blessing! I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you will I curse – through you will be blessed all the nations of the earth.

[Avram was his name until midway through the Torah's story, when God changed it.]

Chesed (Devotion to Others) and Tzedek (Justice) – Genesis 18

Adonai appeared to Avraham by the terebinths of Mamre – and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent at the hottest time of day. Avraham lifted up his eyes and he saw: Look, three men standing over him! He ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by from your servant. Let a bit of water be taken, and wash your feet, and relax under the tree. And I will take a piece of bread and your hearts may feast, and afterward you may pass – for this is why you have passed this way by your servant.” And they said, “Do as you have spoken.”

Avraham hurried to the tent, to Sarah, and he said, “Hurry, three measures of fine flour, knead it and make cakes!” And to the herd Avraham ran, and he took a calf, tender and good, and he gave it to the lad, and he hurried to make it. He took curd and milk, and the calf

that he had made, and he gave it before them. And he stood over them, under the three, and they ate.

They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” He said, “Here, in the tent.” He [the messenger] said, “I will return, yes return to you at a time of life, and then look, a son for Sarah your wife!” And Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, behind him. Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, and Sarah had stopped experiencing the manner of women. So Sarah laughed inside herself, saying, “After so long without it, shall I have pleasure when my husband is so old?” And Adonai said to Avraham, “Why is it that Sarah is laughing, saying, 'Is it even possible that I would give birth, now that I am old?' Is anything beyond God? At the set time I will return to you, at a time of life, and Sarah will have a son.” Sarah protested, “I did not laugh” – for she was afraid – but God said, “No, indeed you laughed!”

The men got up from there, and they looked out over Sodom, and Avraham was walking with them to send them off. Adonai said, “Shall I cover up from Avraham what I am doing? After all, Avraham is sure to become a great and powerful nation, and through him all the nations of the land will be blessed. For I have known him, so that he will command his children and his household after him to guard the way of Adonai, to do righteousness and justice, so that God will bring over Avraham all that God has spoken about him.”

God said, “[I am responding to] the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah, for it is great, and their wrongdoing, for it is very heavy. I will go down now and see whether they have done everything that this outcry coming to Me

suggests – and if not, I will know.”

The men turned from there and went toward Sodom, and Avraham was still standing before Adonai. Avraham came close and said, “Will you even wipe out the innocent with the guilty? Perhaps there are fifty innocents in the midst of the city – will you even wipe out the place and not lift off their guilt, for the sake of the fifty innocents that are inside it? It would profane You to kill the innocent with the guilty, that the guilty should fare just like the innocent. It would profane You – will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?”

Adonai said, “If I will find in Sodom fifty innocents in the midst of the city, I will lift off the guilt of the whole place for their sake.”

Avraham answered and said, “Look, I have dared to speak to my Lord, and I am but dust and ashes. Perhaps the fifty innocents are missing five – will you destroy because of five the whole city?” And God said, “I will not destroy if I find there forty-five.”

And he spoke once again to God, and said, “Perhaps forty will be found there.” And God said, “I will not do it, because of the forty.”

And he said, “Let God not be angry with me when I speak – perhaps thirty will be found there.” And God said, “I will not do it, because of the thirty.”

And he said, “Look, I have dared to speak to my Lord – perhaps twenty will be found there.” And God said, “I will not destroy, because of the twenty.”

And he said, “Let God not be angry with me, when I speak one last time – perhaps ten will be found there.” And God said, “I will not destroy, because of the ten.” And Adonai went, having finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place.”

From the Midrash:

Avraham, Smasher of Idols and Rebel

Avram's family used to make images and sell them in the market. One day, when it was Avram's turn to sell, his father Terach gave him several baskets of household gods and set him up in the marketplace. A man came to him and asked: Have you a god to sell? Avram: What kind of god do you wish to buy? The man: I am a mighty man - give me a god as mighty as I am. So Avram took an image that was standing on a shelf higher than all the others and said: Pay the money and take this one. The man asked: Is this god as mighty as I am? Avram replied: You good-for-nothing! Don't you know the way of gods? The one who sits above all others is the mightiest of all.

As the man was about to leave, Avram asked him: How old are you? The man answered: Seventy years. Avram said: Woe to a man who is seventy, yet prostrates himself before this thing which was made only today. At that, the man flung that god back into Avram's basket, demanded the return of his money, and went his way.

A woman came carrying a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it to the gods. At that, Avram seized a stick, smashed all the images, and placed the stick in the hand

of the biggest of them.

When his father came, he asked: Who did this to the gods? Avram answered: Would I hide anything from my father? A woman came with a bowl of fine flour and said: Here, offer it up to them. When I offered it, one god said, "I will eat first," and another said, "No, I will eat first." Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others. His father replied: Are you making sport of me? They cannot do anything! Avram answered: You say they cannot. Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying!

Terach took Avram and handed him over the King Nimrod. Nimrod said: Do you not know that I am the master of all things, including the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations – why are you undermining my authority? Just then, God gave Avram the idea to respond: The way the universe works since the day it was created is that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Tomorrow, command the sun to rise in the west and set in the east, and then I will testify that you are indeed the master of the universe.

**A Modern Midrash:
Who Were Avraham and Sarah, Our Founders?**
From Rabbi Jon's Yom Kippur sermon (2009)

They were inventors. The inventors of *chesed* -- of kindness, of generosity, of reaching out. They never stopped asking each other, what's the right way. Warm challah, delivered personally; or orange orchards, which is to say: public works, solid and enduring. That's who

they were, and that's why the Blessed Holy One chose them in the first place.

They left Ur, the great ancient city; they left alone and walked. They knew their own sadness, of separation, being apart from their families. They believed that each day was like a *tallit* that the Blessed Holy One wrapped around them, they felt that God steadied their feet, gave sun and water and nourishment for them and their small flocks. They knew the first commandment before God even had to tell them: Be like Me. Reach out, look for ways to care for the varied people you will meet on your journey.

When they stopped for a while in Haran, along the road in Syria, Avraham and Sarah would go into the marketplace and pray. This how they prayed: They stood facing each other. They looked up, then at each other. Then they each turned around in place, slowly to the right, and looked in all directions. They paid attention to everyone they could see. When they completed a circle, they would close their eyes, and look up again. It took about thirty seconds.

It was remarkable the visions they would have in those thirty seconds. Invariably, they could see a furrowed brow even a mile away, or hear a silent cry. Sarah would go off and bake, and bring the bread to someone she had noticed somewhere in the 360. Avraham would leave a basket of fruit, the same way.

People started joining them -- not just people who had been touched by their kindness, but people who watched them in the daily, circling prayer. There were those who

were enthralled by the arguments, the great challah-orange debate, which could be easily heard over meals in their tent, which they kept open at all times. By the time Avraham and Sarah picked up for Canaan, they were a community of hundreds. A growing circle of *chesed*, of generosity and devotion, of need and response.

Service and Community:

In the Desert, Among Strangers

By Rabbi Jon – excerpted from myjewishlearning.com

...”Abraham planted an *eshel*-tree in Be'er Sheva, and there he called the name of Adonai, Eternal God. And Abraham lived in the land of the Philistines a long time." The peace treaty is jarring--it comes as Abraham's own family seems to be collapsing, and stands in counterpoint to the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah. The rabbis of the *midrash* (rabbinic exegetical narrative) try to make sense of the episode, and their point of entry is, of all things, the tree.

In one midrash, two rabbis offer their views on what exactly the *eshel* was. One says: an orchard. The other says: an inn, a way station for desert travelers. Either way, Abraham marks his new bond with the Philistines by getting involved with them, providing and sharing food.

Maybe Abraham was reflecting on his experience with Sodom. He had argued on their behalf, but from a comfortable distance--looking down into the valley from his home up in the hills. For all his talk of justice, he had done nothing to engage with the evil and corruption right

in those cities. Here, Abraham decides to take seriously his own talk about justice, creating community right there in the desert, looking out for vulnerable travelers among the Philistines as well as his own people.

The rabbi who teaches that an *eshel* is an inn has to justify his creative translation. The three letters of the Hebrew word *eshel*, he says, each stand for an element of Abraham's hospitality: aleph for "*achilah*," eating; shin for "*shtiya*," drinking, and lamed for "*l'vaya*," accompanying travelers on their way.

"Then Abraham lived in the land of Philistines a long time." Not in the cities he had settled in when God first brought him to Canaan, but in the land of the Philistines. Who knows how many strangers Abraham met, what he learned as he shared meals with them, what they taught him as he escorted them toward a safer journey.

If they thanked him, say the rabbis, he would respond: Do you think you have me to thank? Let us thank God together, for it is God's food we are sharing. And, we might add: It is God who brought me to this land, who separated me from people so that I would have to figure out from the beginning how to order my relationships, how to sustain justice in my own home, which I realize is a place of *ayn-shalom*, no peace.

What is Abraham's life, after all, but a twisting story about connection and disconnection? Leaving home, wandering the new land, leaving it in time of famine. Reaching out to travelers, speaking out for ten hypothetical innocents hidden in a culture of evil. In the middle of the desert, Abraham makes a tentative step,

staking out a small parcel for peace and devotion to others with no expectations in return. None of them will be announcing miracles to Sarah or good fortune for their descendents. The *eshel* is a moment of pure service.

It is interesting that in one rabbinic legend, this is the time that Abraham sends messengers to check on Yishmael, and eventually to reunite the family--only for a time, of course, before the terrible challenge from God to offer his other son. But I like to think about that legend, and to imagine Abraham and Sarah with their children at the *eshel* in Be'er Sheva. Peace in the home, service to others. How to preserve that moment, they do not teach us--Torah forwards that challenge to us.