

ROSH HASHANAH

DAY 1

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Were the Torah readings for these two days of Rosh Hashanah from the Book of Genesis to be a Greek tragedy, they might well be titled "Abraham Agonistes." Taken together, the contiguous chapters we read are the harrowing portrait of a man in crisis, engaged in an epic struggle with his wife, his God, his children, his destiny, and, of course, himself- (not necessarily in that order).

Abraham's life had taken a dramatic turn when, at the age of seventy, God selected him to become *Av Hamon Goyim*- the father of a great nation- commanding him to leave his ancestral home in *Ur Kasdim* for an unknown land that God would show him. The journey was rich with the promise of great blessing, and a family legacy that would endure until the end of time. Descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky were promised to him.

In the readings of these two days of Rosh Hashanah, all that promise is thrown into serious disarray. Sarah, who is to be Abraham's partner in the realization of God's intentions, is infertile, and desperately unhappy. If she can't provide an heir for Abraham, God's promise will remain unfulfilled. So she turns to Hagar, her handmaiden, and commands her to bear a child with Abraham, which she does- Yishmael. But when Sarah herself subsequently conceives with Abraham and gives birth to Isaac, she is overwhelmed by jealousy, feeling that Hagar and Yishmael have commanded too much of Abraham's love, threatening her beloved son's destiny. She orders Abraham to expel Hagar and Yishmael from the household. Abraham is terribly unhappy, but God tells him to listen to Sarah, with the assurance that his promised line will descend through Isaac, and not Yishmael.

If the story ended there, it would be difficult enough for all the characters involved. But tomorrow's Torah reading ratchets the tension up, and the pathos. Ostensibly as a test of faith, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his sole remaining son. We know well that, at the end of the story, which lasts all of thirty-three verses, Isaac is spared by the intervention of an angel. But these stories leave us breathless and spiritually spent, obliged to wonder why, of all the biblical passages that might be appropriate for these High Holidays, the ancient Rabbis selected these. Within the context of the *Yamim Nora'im*, when we're focused on life and death, contemplating our mortality and how we are to live a worthwhile life during our limited time on this earth, what are we intended to learn from Abraham's struggles? Despite God's remarkable selection of Abraham and the unprecedented mission that he subsequently

embarks on, it seems as if everything that Abraham touches goes wrong. His wife is furious with him, the mother of his first-born son has been exiled along with his child, his beloved Isaac is traumatized, probably forever, and the future feels anything but secure. It's not a pretty picture, especially given that God is guiding the process... One has to wonder if Abraham was missing the predictability of his life back in *Ur Kasdim*...

These are questions that I've been asking myself for many years. They're timeless questions, really, without definitive answers. But this year, a new insight came to me from an unexpected source.

Some of you may remember that my sister and brother-in-law from Israel, Bea and Jerry, spent a rare Shabbat with us here in Forest Hills in late June, just a few days before my surgery. They had arrived in the States weeks before that, for a long-planned visit to some of America's most glorious national parks. In addition to Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, they visited the Red Rocks Amphitheatre and Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce and Zion in Utah... and I might be leaving one or two out. Judging by the pictures and the stories that accompanied them, it was the trip of a lifetime for them... a great way to come back and visit America, far from the craziness that occupies so much of our attention right now, and certainly far from Israel and its own version of craziness.

When they returned to our home after their trip, my sister, who is an accomplished wordsmith and writer in her own right, tried like so many who experience the glory and grandeur of those parks to transmit the experience in words other than "awesome" and "magnificent." It wasn't easy to do those sights justice, but one thing that made a lasting impression on her was a sign that she saw repeatedly throughout the parks. It read, simply, "Leave No Footprint..." Three simple words that convey a profound ecological message!

When visiting shrines like those parks, human visitors are obliged to develop a radical respect for their natural state, and do nothing- absolutely nothing- to change it. Littering is the most obvious and least of the obligation- the parks don't even sell food! - but it's much more than that. Nothing that you do should change the state of being that you encounter, and when you leave, no one should know that you were there. No footprint! As my sister spoke about it, it was clear to me that the consciousness that those signs created fostered something close to a sense of awe and reverence in her- a genuinely spiritual experience. The ultimate message of "leave no footprint" would be that to ignore the directive would be a sin in the truest sense of the word against nature and its grandeur. We have all, in these difficult times, been made aware of the "carbon footprint" that we are leaving on this planet- amazingly, people are still arguing about it- but in the little microcosm of a natural park, there's no arguing to be done.

The more my sister spoke of this idea, the more taken I was with it. And then, suddenly, it hit me. From an ecological perspective, “leave no footprint” is essentially distilled Torah. But from an experiential perspective, it is nothing less than antithetical to what Judaism and a life of Torah prescribes for us. In our limited time on earth, God doesn’t want us to “leave no footprint;” God wants us to leave a large, recognizable and worthwhile footprint! The idea of repairing the world- *Tikkun Olam*- is all about changing it for the better, not accepting it as it is, in all of its mediocrity. We’re not born into this world to simply mark time and wait to die. An authentic Jewish life demands of us no less than full involvement in the world. When you stand in judgment before God after death, you will surely be asked what it was that you accomplished in your life... what did you try to do, how did you try to change the world for the better, how did Torah and Mitzvot lead you to a realization that your time on earth is limited, and you need to use it wisely, and for good cause? Surely God will never congratulate us for keeping a low profile all our lives and avoiding the difficult issues that demand our attention. Yes, I said to my sister, I love what you’re saying about the parks, but in terms of life itself, living right is all about leaving a footprint. The world should know that you were here, and that your life mattered... Come back with me, if you will, to Abraham, the patriarch who, as we read this morning, was in the process of leaving a huge footprint...

It would indeed have been easier for Abraham to refuse God’s call of לך לך – to leave *artzecha, molad’techa, u’veit avicha* – his country, his homeland, his father’s home, for an unknown land. He was an older man already. Who needed that kind of total upheaval? But because of his greatness, Abraham understood that what God was saying to him was that it was time for him to “leave his footprint.” Whatever gifts he had could never find their fullest expression in *Ur Kasdim*, where idolatry was a deeply entrenched reality. He needed to get out of there, and God was making that possible for him in a land that would be his for all time.

What Abraham discovered in these Rosh Hashanah readings, and what he continued to discover throughout the rest of his life, is that leaving a footprint can involve enormous sacrifice, pain, and trauma. He suffered all of these, as he introduced to the world the radically different idea of monotheism. From the moment that he left his home, nothing about his epic journey would be easy. It would strain his family relations to the point of breaking, cause him to look deeply within himself to discover the outer limits of his own faith, and drain him physically and spiritually. What we are witness to in these readings are the most difficult moments in Abraham’s life. We see him as a man in full, possessed of the divine message but struggling as a human being. There is nothing about these readings that is easy, or kind. What is most remarkable about them is that, in the face of all that he faces, he soldiers on... truly, to paraphrase Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik’s famous subject, a lonely man of faith- making a difference that would change the world forever; leaving a footprint so that all who follow him would be able to walk in his path.

We are living through times that are unsettled and disturbing in ways that defy easy description. For the past few weeks, the overwhelming force of nature has forced us to confront the ultimate fragility of those things we take most for granted- certainly a theme of these High Holidays, but forced to the forefront of our consciousnesses by images of nature at its most angry. The disasters, one after another, have battered us- unprecedented flooding across Texas and the Gulf Coast, a powerful earthquake in Mexico, the almost inconceivable spectacle of a hurricane so large and powerful that it literally spanned the entire state of Florida with its destructive power. We have been reminded in existentially terrifying ways that despite all our technological advances, when confronted with the sheer power of natural forces, we are totally and completely humbled.

But the sad truth is that the most terrifying challenges that we have been confronted with are, if you will, man-made. Hatred the likes of which we thought we would never have to deal with again in our lifetimes has reared its ugly head, in the bosom of a major American campus in Virginia. The response of our own elected national leadership has been, to be charitable, woefully inadequate and morally reprehensible. Our country, built out of a mosaic tapestry that brought those fleeing from oppression and deprivation abroad to our borders, seeking a new and better life, struggles to find the requisite will and compassion to be welcoming, with a White House official actually challenging whether the Emma Lazarus poem that adorns the Statue of Liberty- the very symbol of welcoming that our parents and grandparents saw as a sign of their salvation when their boats entered New York Harbor. - should be considered a part of the Statue of Liberty itself, and what it represents. Our country, the land of the free and the home of the brave, is less free and less brave than it has ever been...

So, my question to you this Rosh Hashanah morning is... what footprint are you leaving? How are you to be true to the imperative- our authentically Jewish imperative- to lead a life of substance and meaning, to live a conscious life, one that makes a difference and does not blindly accept what is unacceptable? Climate change issues aside, we will always be humbled by the awesome and overwhelming power of natural disaster, but man-made disasters demand better of us. They demand will, and courage. How are we to leave our footprint?

There is, of course, no one definitive answer to this question, because each one of us is different, with different strengths and weaknesses, different life circumstances. That said, what we share is the decision not to go to sleep on what is happening all around us. Never before have we needed to wake up quite as urgently as we do now.

To that end, I want to leave you with an answer to that question that I heard from Congressman John Lewis from Atlanta, Georgia, an authentic American hero from the civil

rights movement of the 60's. Congressman Lewis marched by Martin Luther King's side over the Raymond Pettis bridge, was drenched by water hoses on numerous occasions, jailed repeatedly, beaten by racist police... he literally and figuratively put his life on the line to attain justice and freedom for African-Americans in this country.

On two occasions- once at my rabbinic convention, and once at the Commencement Exercises of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he received an honorary doctorate- he spoke to us directly to us as people of faith who had been his partners back then. What he said was that sometimes, particularly in religious circles, the prevailing wisdom is that peace is to be preserved at all costs. In our religious tradition, we call it *sha shtill*.... Be quiet, don't stir the pot, don't violate the quiet... don't make trouble.

What John Lewis said, with firm and unmistakable resolve, was that we had it wrong. Sometimes, he said, you *have to* make trouble. But what you *have to do*, he said, is make **good** trouble... not trouble for its own sake, but trouble for the sake of the greater good. Don't be afraid to make good trouble, he told us. And there wasn't a person in the room who didn't understand what he meant. Without firing a shot or tearing apart a city, he and his partners had changed the course of American history by making good trouble. Without his efforts and those of his colleagues, America would still have separate restrooms, hotels and restaurants for African-Americans in the South, and their votes would remain uncounted.

Sometimes- not always, but sometimes- leaving a footprint involves making good trouble. Abraham certainly did. My message to you this morning is, don't be afraid to leave a footprint. These times demand it.