

*“Derek Jeter, Avraham Avinu, and Setting Our Personal Mission”*

If you had told this Baltimore boy 10 years ago that he’d be giving a Rosh Hashanah sermon in the Bronx, he might have believed you. But if you had told him he would lead off by suggesting a Rosh Hashanah lesson to be learned from retiring Yankees captain, #2, Derek Jeter, I definitely would have run in the other direction!

But what has so moved me of late, reading about Jeter and his outstanding 20 year career as he approaches his final game this Sunday, is the story of his Turn 2 Foundation, an organization devoted to reaching out to youth around the country to help them turn away from drugs and alcohol and literally “Turn 2” healthy lifestyles and healthy choices.

I naturally assumed that in recent years, as Jeter reached super-stardom and collected endorsement contracts and massive celebrity status, he decided to do something charitable with his name and his fame.

So I was really blown away to read the story of the founding of Turn 2, which happened in 1996, when Jeter, age 22, and a Yankees rookie, over a pizza dinner with his father in a Detroit hotel, announced to his dad that he wanted to start a foundation and help kids have a better life. He was a kid himself at the time!

Not to mention that Derek stood up in front of his fourth grade class in Michigan and proudly told them that he would one day be the shortstop for the Yankees like his idol Phil Rizzuto.

This is a person who has had a clear mission since he was a kid – and he has devoted his life to seeing it through. At a crossroads, at a moment of uncertainty, he could turn to his values and his mission and know which way to go.

I am so moved by this example because every year, when my New Year’s Resolution list looks roughly similar to last year’s, I ask myself if there is a better way. How do I chart a successful course to personal growth and to truly being the person I want to be?

Rosh Hashanah is about thinking big. It is about God as King of the Universe. God as the One Who Remembers All. About the blasts of the shofar that echo from Sinai to Redemption and back again. And it asks of us to think big, to dream big.

It’s not to say that the list of things to improve on for the coming year is not important – it is. But Rosh Hashanah is simply bigger than that list. It wants us to go beyond that list.

How do we make today about more than just that litany of things I want to fix, and make it a day of true growth and fundamental reorientation?

With all due respect to Derek Jeter, one answer comes from a more ancient hero of ours, Avraham Avinu, a core character of our chosen Torah readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah, in the enigmatic conclusion of the second day’s Torah reading. Recall it with me.

After all he's been through, decades of no children, and then being blessed with Yishmael, and then casting him out, and then being blessed with Yitzhak, and then being asked to give him up as a sacrifice to God, Avraham is finally ready to come off Mt. Moriah to a quieter time. He has completed the 10 trials and tests of God as they are listed in the medieval sources as the Akeidah concludes. And then our reading ends with the very mundane telegram that Avraham receives: that his brother Nachor has had a number of children.

What do we need this ending to the story for?

The classic answer comes from hearing the name of one of Nachor's children:

בראשית פרק כב: (כב) וְאֶת כָּשָׁד וְאֶת חֲזוּ וְאֶת פִּלְדָּשׁ וְאֶת יִדְלָף וְאֶת בְּתוּאֵל: (כג) וּבְתוּאֵל יָלַד אֶת רִבְקָה...  
...רבקה

*[Nachor fathered...] Kesed and Chazo and Pildash and Yidlaf, and Betuel, and Betuel fathered Rivkah... (Genesis 22:22-23)*

Finally, having escaped the near loss of Yitzhak, Avraham hears of his brother's children, and we the readers are made known that the one who will ultimately marry Yitzhak has been born. All the pain and suffering was for a purpose. The stage is set for this covenant to have a future. We can finally rest easy knowing all the pieces are in place.

But contemporary Torah scholar Dr. Bryna Levy, a senior lecturer at Matan in Yerushalayim, in her beautiful book on the Yamim Noraim, "Waiting for Rain", writes:

"Alternatively, it has been argued that embedded within this passage is another trial. We are told, at the end of the harrowing ordeal of the Akedah, that Abraham walked away with one son, by the skin of his teeth, as it were. In contrast, his brother Nahor, who had stayed home in Mesopotamia – Terah's son who did not hear the Divine call of lekh lekha – merited 12 children. Twelve, of course, represents the biblical number of peoplehood, as in the 12 tribes. Abraham would not be blessed thus for two more generations. The final note of the story, therefore, leaves us wondering about the measure of God's justice in the world, and suggests that the last trial of Abraham, the forefather of the Hebrew nation, was not the 10<sup>th</sup> but rather the 11<sup>th</sup>. His ultimate ordeal was a test of his long-range vision, of his ability to look beyond the contradictions and disappointments of the present moment. Such farsightedness was required of Abraham, and would be required of his descendants for Jewish survival throughout the ages."

What a powerful reversal. The end of the story is not its culmination, with a reassurance of the imminent fruition of God's promises through the announcement of Rivkah's birth, but quite the opposite - the sting that one of our tradition's greatest heroes, making it through one of life's hardest moments, was forced yet again to see his lot as incomplete, and not yet at the fulfillment of God's promises.

So what can we take away from such a bitter final note? Why read this postscript as a downer? And what do we make of Avraham's silence in the face of it?

Perhaps the answer can come from reflecting on Avraham's personality as it is characterized throughout his life story in Bereishit.

Remember in the next chapter, Sarah, Avraham's wife, dies. After his mourning for her, the Torah tells us:

בראשית פרק כג: (ג) וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי מֵתוֹ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי חֵת לֵאמֹר:

*Avraham arose from the presence of his deceased and spoke to the Hittites, saying: (Genesis 23:3)*

Avraham gets up – he rises. He has mourned, and now he must transcend his hardship and get to a higher level. See the big picture and go forward.

The orientation of upwards direction, of getting to the big picture, the lofty goals, to the mission – is at the heart of Avraham's identity. He is the one about whom the Torah says multiple times, וישא עיניו – he lifted up his eyes – he was able to see things from the balcony level. To glimpse beyond.

Indeed, when God charges him in Genesis 13:14 to stake his claim in the Land of Israel, God uses the language of וישא עיניך וראה – lift up your eyes and see, about which the Meshekh Hokhmah beautifully says, וישא עיניך – see the spiritual realm, see the true way the world works.

I believe Avraham is actually the only character in the Tanakh who truly displays a sense of mission of his own accord. Plenty of characters respond powerfully to challenges, or think about the future, and plenty of prophets transmit God's mission for the Jewish nation, but only Avraham has a personal sense of mission.

It is this aspect of Avraham, we are told, that causes God to choose him to be our progenitor:

בראשית פרק יח: (יט) כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יִקְוֶה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא יִקְוֶה עַל אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:

*For I, God, have known about Avraham that he will be so mission driven that he will instruct his family to follow in his footsteps and follow a path – God's path – to do righteousness and justice – to perpetuate the new mission of ethical monotheism... (paraphrase of Genesis 18:19)*

Avraham has mission. It is his mission – but is in sync with God's mission. And he has the capacity to stick to that mission – to raise his eyes when they might otherwise be downcast. To pick himself up after moments of fallenness.

This is the silent postscript to the Torah reading of these two days. There are rarely happy endings. Even happy endings, like the relief of the akeidah, often leave us looking around and seeing that we are still not where we want to be. I think of this summer: even after peace, after relief, we are not anywhere near realizing the peace, the security, the ideals of which we dream.

And then we have to pick ourselves up and come back to ask: what is the mission? What am I doing all this for?

If we know the answer to that question, we can take the next steps forward in our hard – but covenantal, rewarding, and critical – mission as a people and as individuals.

Let us return again to that pasuk about Avraham's mission. The Torah tells us that Avraham will instruct his household to follow אחריו – after him. We might have expected the Torah to say אחרי – after me, God. But it is actually Avraham's personal sense of mission and vision, coordinated with God's, that makes him successful.

Avraham has a mission of how he wants to be in the world, and it keeps him on track. It is something innate and internal to him, synced up with God's vision for the world, and he is able to push it forward no matter the obstacles and the challenges he faces.

This is the call of Rosh Hashanah.

The truth is, as you search Jewish literature, there is very little about personal mission. In general, we are tasked to subjugate our personal mission and vision to God's, and subsume ourselves into the whole of the Jewish people and our place in the world.

But we will never succeed if we don't find our voice, our passion, our specialty – and make it a part of our overarching mission as Jews and as human beings.

That, I believe, is what Rosh Hashanah is all about. It is a day when the judgment doesn't just ask, did you do this right or wrong? Did you keep that commandment or that one?

No – it is a day to ask ourselves: do I have a personal mission statement? Do I have an articulated set of goals, that are part of the fiber of who I am and what I care about, that drives me, that helps me make decisions, that I am passionate about, and that I can come back to in life's ups and downs to figure out where to go next?

Avraham Avinu did – and it helped him go forward through 10 trials – and through the subtle 11<sup>th</sup>, and the end of the Torah reading when the fulfillment of his mission was still far off, and it just didn't seem fair.

And, yes, Derek Jeter did – and it drove him to be the ballplayer and the baal chesed that he truly is.

And this is the teaching of Rebbe Nachman when he spoke about (Likutei Moharan Tinyana 63) the shepherd's song:

כל רועה ורועה יש לו גגון מיוחד משלו – every shepherd has his own melody, a melody that comes from his environment, that bubbles up from the grass, from his influences, and his inner self. And it shapes the entirety of the shepherd's being – everything she does, everything she creates.

So as we listen and participate in the tefillot over these days – as we hear the wakeup call of the shofar – and as we follow Avraham's dogged and persistent journeys, what if we took it as a challenge and asked ourselves:

What is my mission? And how does it take its place in God's mission for Bnei Yisrael and for humankind?

Let us move past our lists of resolutions and say, what do I see when I lift my eyes? When I rise up, where does it take me?

Author David Corbett, who writes on finding our personal mission for people moving towards retirement, offers 5 tools that can help us all:

- 1) Get Into Neutral – create some open space – perhaps during Mussaf today – to really think about who we are and what we want
- 2) Retell Your Life Story – review where we've been and what we know about ourselves. Organize our lives and read old writings and materials. Allow ourselves to discover who we are.
- 3) Use Your Verbs – don't think of ourselves using nouns - titles, labels, roles and affiliations. Ask not about what you want to be but what you want to do.
- 4) Write a Personal Mission Statement – really set down in writing the values, beliefs and interests we care about the most.
- 5) Involve Others – discover and define ourselves with the support of those we know best – and those who know us.

It has not been a simple year. So much threatened to push us off-mission, from the Pew Report, to boycotts of Israel, to controversies of women's opportunity to wear tefillin, to unrest and violence in Russia and the Ukraine, to shootings around this country, to the deaths of leaders from Ariel Sharon to Leonard Fein to Joan Rivers to Rav Ovadya Yosef, to of course this unimaginable summer, as we mourned the loss of far, far too many lives on both sides, and pledge never to forget our boys, and to offer support to their families. To where we find ourselves now, with sectarian violence erupting in the Middle East, a still uncertain future with Iran's nuclear program, and a certain sense of dread about the months to come.

And we've had our own journeys. Losses of loved ones, and new life. Losses of job, and new opportunities. Moments of clarity, and periods of confusion. A lot that makes it hard to stick to a mission.

More than ever, it is a time not to be reactive, but to be proactive.

To be Avrahams.

To lift up our eyes and see, even in a world where the wicked too often prosper, to see our mission – to define our personal mission and to situate it in God's mission for this world.

Take the time. Challenge yourself. Find out who you are and what you want to be and do, and do it.

And then may we go forward with strength into the year ahead.

Shanah tovah.