

Lech Lecha-Installation Dvar Torah
11/12/16

When I was growing up in Astoria, Oregon, a small town on the Oregon coast, one of my favorite family trips was taking the drive to Long Beach Washington, the home of a *very* long beach, and also, as I remember clearly, a fantastically large toy store and chocolate factory. While I did enjoy the destination, in many ways the drive itself always fascinated me. It was a long drive, over many curvy roads, through forests and a few small towns, yet it always began with the bridge over the Columbia river. The four mile bridge, the “Bridge to Nowhere” as we called it, led from the Astoria pier to the other side—where you found, well, a rock wall and sign, which pointed you either left or right. We of course always went left—that was the way to the beach.

There was something miraculous about our slow descent from high up on the Astoria side of the bridge, with the ships and tugboats sailing beneath, to the low flat road that seemed to be floating on the water. And then we would get to the other side where there would be nothing but the rock wall. A truly beautiful bridge, if not also an authentic bridge to nowhere.

But the real miracle, the real beauty occurred on the not-so-rare day when there was fog over the bridge. As the car descended down to the river, down into those misty clouds hovering over the water, I would look out of the back window, glance all around and imagine that we were flying. We were no longer in a car headed to the beach, we were instead in a plane weaving through the clouds, on our way to some fantastic and unknown destination. With the white smoky puffs of cloud zooming past the windows, there seemed to be nothing ahead of us, and nothing behind—in a very real sense, and in a way I could even understand as a child, there was only us in the car at that very moment. And even though the cloud made it difficult to see or have any sense of direction, being surrounded by the fog, not only seemed endlessly mysterious but ultimately also gave me a sense

of safety. *I knew where we were coming from, and I had a sense where we were headed, and that is all that mattered.*

As we gather together this morning, we know that sometimes it is easy to feel lost, to let those clouds of mystery turn to clouds of darkness that instead leave us feeling nothing but stuck. In the past week, our world has changed in ways that so many of us never could have imagined, and now for many of us we don't even know where to turn. New leaders have taken power, our values, and our understanding of the strength of compassion and even basic human dignity are now called into question. It is not my place to be political or ever endorse a specific candidate. Yet, I see it as my role to bring out the values I believe we should seek to realize in the world as a compassionate spiritual community.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out, with the outcome of the US election, Brexit and the rise of extremism around the world, we are witnessing the birth of as some would say, a new politics of anger, or if nothing else a politics of separation. This is not where I thought we would ever be, and I certainly didn't think that this would be the discussion we would have today as we mark a very different transition in our own community. Yet thankfully, as there always is, there also is so much room for hope.

As we are reminded in this week's portion, our personal journeys inherently both are strengthened and come into conflict by what we encounter in our world--we must sometimes move past, or be forced from what is most comfortable and safe, and journey into the unknown. The portion begins as God tells Abraham, *lech lecha*, to-*"Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you."* Of course for Abraham, his leaving home is a very physical experience, and he is looking ahead to his upcoming journey, to the mysteries of what lies ahead.

It is often pointed out how odd it is that Abraham is being told to leave first his land, then his birthplace and only at the end, the place most close to his heart, the place of comfort and safety, his home. Rashi comments that this order

is not geographic, it is instead an ascending scale of the pain of departure from the familiar: “Because it is difficult for a person to leave the country in which one has lived, one’s social group, the familiar environment. But it is even harder to leave the place where one was born. The hardest thing is to leave parents and what is familiar.”

Now we know that Abraham is not weakened, at least outwardly, by loss of his home, by the distance of his family and place of comfort. He continues to be true to his faith and his family, and in fact grows to represent the best of humanity. Away from the familiar, he continues to open up his tent to strangers and those in need--he welcomes without judgement wanderers regardless of their faith, their background or their past. Removed from a calm world of straightforward peace and justice, he argues with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. And as his wife dies, as his sons leaves him, he continues to honor their lives, and stay connected to the land, his traditions and to God. He moves forward with faith, with pride and with an understanding that even the toughest trials can lead to a place of hope. In fact, according to our tradition, it is in Abraham's strength in the midst of endless adversity that turns him into the first Jew.

The Sefat Emet says that with each trial, with each challenge, Abraham is made into a new being, with a new way of being and interacting with the world, and again and again he is brought out of a place of normalcy and thrown down the broken path leading him forward. Stability never finds his way to the life of Abraham, but neither does complacency or surrender.

In Judaism, even the greatest darkness has the possibility of leading to light.

Of course we know that each cycle of day and night always includes darkness, and it is no coincidence that it is during the night when that we most often sleep--shutting our eyes to the world around us, and unconsciously delving within to our own thoughts and dreams. The Talmud tells us that sleep is 1/60th

of death, that it is a time when our physical bodies and our spiritual selves shut down. **But the Talmud also tells us what happens when we wake up and see that first morning light, and this I think is where we need the reminder today.** Birchot HaShachar, the morning prayers are recited at dawn. And how do we know when dawn is? Not when the sun rises, but according to the Talmud, when a person can recognize the face of a haver, a friend (Talmud Brachot 9b). Only when we can see other people and recognize them for the ways they are connected to us, does the darkness begin to fade away. And only then can we offer blessings.

Our goal as a community involves always being present to each other, to offer the deepest of listening, the clearest of vision and the knowledge that **inside each person we encounter is a story that we want to be a part of.** Martin Buber says it well: “All real living is meeting.” The ultimate goal of Jewish community, of any community should be to create a space where this kind of relationship and experience of connecting is both easy and accessible. When a person walks into **this** holy space, they should never feel anonymous or unknown. Each one of us should feel as if our story, our way of seeing the world matters and can add strength to our relationships with others and to the community.

In our community, as in every Jewish community, as the darkness settles on the world, every Friday night, we gather together for Shabbat to bless the joys of life, to take a moment to let go of the challenges, and to above all *recognize* each other. In the midst of the darkness, we light the Shabbat candles and gather the light reflected on each others faces. The next day, we read the Torah and dance with joy at the traditions passed down to us by our ancestors. And then guided by this light, we settle into the experience of Shabbat. As it says a bit later in the Torah during their Exodus from Egypt, “and the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings” as the darkness descended on the land, we too continue to enjoy

light through all the **joys and the suffering** taking place around us. The simple greeting of Shabbat Shalom, Shabbat Peace is a recognition of relationships and a reminder to the person whom we greet and to ourselves that we need each other, and that we are a community of individuals, waiting and needing to connect and bring light to each other's lives.

As I reflect on the learning and experiences I have gained over my years of working in the Jewish community, I find that the more knowledge I gain and the more people whom I meet, the better I am better able to make my way through the experience of Jewish life and also help others do the same. My goal as a rabbi is to help people grow and explore the mysteries inherent in life, and work together to guide my community down a path which leads to more meaning and connection. But I have come to realize that being a rabbi is much more than accepting the role of guide, it is as much helping people gain strength from a world where there is not always one answer, where you never know where the journey will lead.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes very profoundly on this idea, seeing rabbinic leadership as being a guide through the "cloud" of Jewish life. He writes:

That is how teaching takes place in the Jewish community: the Torah or Scripture is expounded, interpreted, plumbed, allegorized, manipulated, massaged, psychoanalyzed, inverted, sliced, and diced. There is no one correct interpretation. Judaism may begin with a book, but it ends in the clouds. It is not a literal or a fundamentalist tradition. Respect for teachers and text is expressed through arguing with them. The rabbis long ago understood this when they said that the stories in the Torah couldn't be about what they seem to be about, otherwise we could write better stories.

As Kushner concludes:

A rabbi, you might say, introduces people to the cloud of the divine presence and helps them not to be frightened of the disorientation that necessarily comes from realizing an infinity of meanings.

We are blessed to be part of a tradition that sees life as a spiritual journey, one which has built in hills, turns, a few dead ends and plenty of majestic views. And for most of us, we are not looking towards some final destination, we instead do our best to make the best of what we experience now. The arguments of the Talmud don't always have an answer that we can rely upon for the ultimate truth, our hero Moses never makes it to the promised land, and olam ha ba, the world to come, is far more an ideal than the ultimate prize. From Abraham to the Israelites wandering through the desert, this complicated journey into the unknown is the essence of what it means to be human. Sometimes life leaves us disoriented, unable to see, and unprepared for what might lie ahead. Working together, we can have faith that in the unknown, and if we have built the our community with strength and compassion, then we trust that we will be led down the path of more learning, openness, and holiness.

I am excited to be your rabbi, and to embark with you on this new journey of exploration and learning together. We will share so much together as a community, and hopefully, as I have said before, I will do all that I can to make this a home for everyone. This is a kehillah kedoshah, and this holy community is a place, needs to be a place, where we can retreat from the troubles of the world, even as we step out with pride and work to change it. We can sit together and celebrate as we experience all the blessings we receive. We are the home for the religious, the secular, the cultural and ambivalent. We are a place of comfort, safety and acceptance, where we acknowledge love and and respect choice, where diversity and individuality merge with a profound communal responsibility to tradition, peoplehood and hope for the future. As your rabbi, I am honored to be

a guide in our journey together, but **know that I need you**, as we all need each other to move ahead. We can't give up on each other, and we can't give up on fixing what needs healing in the world. To keep each other strong, we need to be together, to accept each other, and make this place a spiritual haven in a sometimes challenging world.

As we continue on in this journey, as a community and as individuals, **let us gain strength** from the cloud that might sometimes surround us and leave us a little lost. The road leads ahead, and if we are able to be sure of anything, we know that this is the best way to go.