

Shanah tovah.

With two little kids, we talk a lot about big feelings in our house these days. Those big feelings often manifest in response to things that may seem small to us: we cut the cucumbers the wrong way, it's time to go to bed, someone else is playing with a beloved toy (or even, quite frankly, with a not-at-all beloved toy). And of course, my seeing those big feelings as overreactions has everything to do with my adult perspective, it's not really fair for me to expect my kids to have the same emotional responses that I do-- to respond with big feelings to things that I perceive as "big" and with more tempered feelings to things that I perceive as just not a big deal.

And we might have the same instincts-- at least I do!-- when we read about the emotional reactions of the various personalities in the Torah readings for Rosh HaShanah. Why do they respond the way that they do? When do we see them being upset, when do we see them being stoic, and *why*?

A little bit of background before we really dive in. A kind of funny thing about how shul works is that we usually talk about the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh HaShanah on the first day of Rosh HaShanah (thanks, Debby!), and the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh HaShanah on the second day of Rosh HaShanah (yasher koach, Marc!). It's very much self-explanatory why we do it that way. But it means that we actually lose part of the meaning of both readings by not thinking about them together.

So today, inspired in very large part by the teaching of Dena Weiss, a scholar of midrash, we're going to bring the two readings back together. Because you'd never be able to tell based on the way it's divided in our machzor, but today's

Torah reading picks up exactly where yesterday's Torah reading ended. Yesterday, we read Bereshit chapter 21; today, we read chapter 22.

And at a very surface level, these stories share a theme-- both are stories of Avraham obeying a divine command to part with a child, first Yishmael and then Yitzchak.

But when we take a closer look at the texts, the similarities are not just coincidental-- it is almost as if the text is full of scribbled in arrows and underlining and highlighting shouting out to us: NOTICE THE PARALLELS HERE!

In these adjacent chapters, the phrase “וַיִּשָּׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר,” “Avraham arose early in the morning,” appears twice-- once as he prepares to send Yishmael out to the wilderness, and once as he prepares to bring Yitzchak to be sacrificed. As part of those preparations, both times, he gathers the necessary supplies and places them where they will be schlepped-- on Hagar's shoulder in chapter 21, and on his donkey's back in chapter 22.

In the moment of crisis-- the water running out in chapter 21, and Avraham bringing the knife towards Yitzchak in chapter 22, both stories include an angel calling out from heaven to assure the child in question will actually be ok. And both stories end with a reference to the child getting married-- in chapter 21, Hagar takes a wife for Yishmael from the land of Egypt, and chapter 22 ends with the birth of Rivkah, and since we've read this book before, we know that this is the arrival of Yitzchak's future wife on the scene.

This actually then feels like it's the same story twice-- Avraham is told that he will lose a son (once to banishment, once to sacrifice), he rises early in the morning to prepare, he packs and loads the supplies, an angel intervenes moments before death to promise the child protection, the child survives and

looks towards marriage. And it is therefore striking that there is one glaring difference: the emotional states of all of the characters, and especially Avraham.

In chapter 21, we have a whole verse (in a rather terse story) dedicated to Avraham's emotional state:

וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֶת בְּנוֹ:

"The matter distressed Avraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his."

He complies with God's command to listen to Sarah and send out Yishmael, but the Torah registers his distress. A few verses later, about the child's mother, Hagar, we are told: "וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ", "she raised her voice and cried." And then the Torah tells us: "וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנָּעִר" "God heard the voice of the child" -- leading us to conclude that presumably Yishmael is crying, too.

Chapter 22, on the other hand, includes not a word about anyone's emotional state. No distress is mentioned, no crying is heard. Not from Sarah, not from Yitzchak, and not from Avraham.

It is worth noting that Sarah dies right after this story, at the beginning of chapter 23, and the midrash imagines that it is her distress at what Avraham has done in nearly sacrificing Yitzchak that kills her. But that emotional reaction isn't present in the text of the Torah itself.

Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak at God's command is already striking. But reading it together with all of the explicit emotional pain of the previous chapter's banishment of Yishmael, Avraham's lack of any emotional response in this story really stands out.

To fully understand what is happening here, we have to go back further than Bereishit 21, to a third time-- the only other time-- that Avraham rises early in the morning. And that's to chapters 18 and 19, the story of the destruction of

S'dom and Amarah. Famously, when God tells Avraham of the plan to destroy the cities for their wickedness, Avraham protests. He negotiates God down to promising not to destroy the cities if 10 righteous people can be found therein. Ultimately, even though God is convinced, there are not 10 righteous people in the cities, and so Avraham's protest is unsuccessful. And so for the first time recorded in the Torah, Avraham rises early in the morning, returns to the place where he had expressed his indignation to God, and watches the smoke rise from the smoldering cities.

And so if we read these three stories together-- the destruction of S'dom and Amarah, the banishment of Yishmael, and the binding of Yitzchak-- then what we discover is a learned helplessness on Avraham's part. A kind of emotional death and numbness as he is repeatedly disappointed.

In the first story, he is so distraught that he argues with God on behalf of the inhabitants of S'dom and Amarah. By the second story, he no longer argues with God, but the Torah registers his distress at what is about to happen, at what he has been called to do. But by the third story, he mechanically fulfills God's command without protest and without distress. Avraham has seemingly just...been broken.

But the Torah gives us one clue that there is maybe a tiny flicker of emotion left in Avraham: I'd like to imagine that Avraham is not a morning person, that awakening early is unusual for him (after all, why would it be recorded otherwise?). I'd like to read Avraham's early waking as an indication of discomfort-- the conclusion of a sleepless night of tossing and turning with anxiety, with sadness, with dread about what the coming morning will bring.

And so while he complies with God's command to bring Yitzchak for sacrifice, while he doesn't protest, while he doesn't *express* any sadness or fear or outrage at the task-- he does sleep poorly. Like in his two earlier moments of moral distress, the destruction of S'dom and Amorah and the banishment of Yishmael, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that Avraham rose early in the morning. He is not so unperturbed that he can just sleep soundly. This whole situation still upsets Avraham, at least subconsciously, at least a little bit.

And while I love -- LOVE-- a good night of sleep, this tossing and turning Avraham resonates with me. We live in a world with so much pain. With so much loss. With so many things that should outrage us. And with the internet and an increasingly globalized world, we are exposed to so much of it. Just the sheer quantity of information we have access to is overwhelming, let alone our emotional responses to it. And like Avraham, I think we sometimes learn that our feelings don't matter. That our anger will not stop injustice, that our sadness cannot bring back lives lost, that our anxiety will not heal our planet. And so to cope with it all, we begin to become numb, to close off our hearts and our nervous systems, in a desire to protect ourselves.

But it doesn't really work. Like Avraham, our emotional responses to everything we encounter can't really be shut off-- they're bound to come out in other ways, whether that's arising early in the morning or things that are more harmful.

But also, perhaps more importantly, I don't think we're supposed to learn from Avraham's example here. Shortly after these stories, the mantle of leadership is passed to Yitzchak, and pretty quickly, the text makes clear that Yitzchak is emotionally alive. We are told that he loves his wife, Rivkah-- he is the

first character in the Torah whom we are told loves their spouse. We learn that he finds comfort in that relationship after his mother's death. Later, we learn that he trembles with fear after bestowing his blessing on the wrong child. Avraham may be praised for his obedience in the akeidah story we read this morning, but once he has reached emotional numbness to the extent of being ready to sacrifice his own son, it is time for him to pass the baton to the next generation.

Because while our emotions alone are insufficient to solve the problems we encounter, remaining open-hearted towards our world and the people within it is the only shot we have at improving anything. And so even if we would rather close ourselves off, pull the blanket over our head, and try to avoid Avraham's early waking, it is imperative that we open our eyes and our hearts.

At this time of year in particular, we are called upon to toss and turn a little bit. While we recite selichot, special penitential prayers, early in the morning before Shacharit, the original vision is that they were to be recited in the middle of the night. Likewise, Rambam famously teaches that the sound of the shofar is calling to us, saying:

עורו יְשָׁנִים מִשְׁנֵתְכֶם וְנִרְדָּמִים הִקִּיצוּ מִתַּרְדֵּימֵיכֶם

Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber!

וְחַפְּשׁוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם וְחִזְרוּ בְּתִשְׁבּוּבָה וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵכֶם.

Probe your actions, return in teshuvah, and remember your Creator.

Even Avraham, defeated after repeated losses and without the sound of the shofar in his ear-- even Avraham finds within himself a little bit of sleeplessness, a small spark of awareness that something isn't right. As we hear the sound of the shofar today, may we open ourselves to big feelings. May we awaken ourselves to

feel the full range of emotions that our Creator has granted us, and may we
thereby begin 5784 with open hearts.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu, may we all be inscribed for a good year.