

Recovering Faith Following Disappointment

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I discovered that *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Patriarch, the first Jew, the original monotheist, the founding father of Western Religion and I have one more thing in common...we have the same circadian rhythm. That is to say, our biological clocks tick to the same beat. Both Abraham and I are *early risers*. My favorite time of day is the early morning, when it's crisp and cool outside; when I can sit and drink my coffee, read the paper, and contemplate the day ahead. I love the quiet potential of the early morning hours, and so too, seemingly did Abraham. You know the studies say that early risers are healthier, happier, and slimmer than night owls! They, or should I say 'we,' tend to be more productive and perform better on the job. And students who consider themselves early risers versus night owls tend to achieve a full grade point higher in their GPAs than night owls do! You see, Abraham's wisdom touches so many parts of our lives! And we are told three times just in this parasha about Abraham waking up early in the morning. *Vayashkeim Avraham baboker*—Abraham rolls out of bed at the crack of dawn. The most famous example of his early rising is to bring his son Isaac as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah...the Akeida as it is called, the binding of Isaac. He leaves early, while Sarah is still sleeping, probably to avoid Sarah asking him what in the world he thinks he's doing with her only son that she waited 90 years to give birth to! The second of Abraham's early mornings involved getting up to pack up his son Ishmael and send him and his mother away. There was too much tension with Sarah and Isaac, too much rivalry, too much conflict, and Sarah tells Abraham that the concubine and her son have to go. So, at the crack of dawn, Abraham is up saddling their donkeys and preparing them for their journey. And the first instance of early rising happens on the morning after S'dom and Gomorrah are destroyed. I can't imagine that Abraham got a whole lot of sleep the night before. You remember, he spent all day arguing with God, how are you going to destroy these cities God? They may be evil, lawless places where you wouldn't want to be caught alone at night, but let's face it, what if there are some good people living there. At least consider the possibility, God, that there are 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10 good people there? What if there are 10 decent people in those cities, can you really justify destroying them? *Ha'shofet kol ha'aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat!* Shall the judge of all the earth not

do justly? Abraham asks with courage and chutzpah? The answer of course is no...there are not even ten good people, and the cities are incinerated by a storm of *gafrif va'esh*, sulfurous fire, which is terrifying enough in and of itself but you know when you burn sulfur it emits sulfur dioxide which is a toxic gas. Witnessing the annihilation of these towns must have been horrifying; and for Abraham who begged and pleaded and argued with God not to destroy them, he must have been in total shock. So after what I imagine was a night during which he was haunted by nightmares, he again gets out of bed early, and returns to the very site where he argued with God to survey the smoldering scene once again.

What was he doing there, at daybreak, where the Torah says *alah kitor ha'aretz k'kitor ha'kivshan*, the smoke of the ruins still rose up like the smoke of a kiln? The rabbis say that he was davvening. He was praying to God, in fact he was instituting *Shaharit*, the morning prayer service. And I think that is nothing less than amazing. In the face of utter disaster...in the wake of profound disappointment and frustration, when Abraham must have felt like a failure, he must have felt totally defeated by his inability to change the outcome, he still gets up the next morning and prays to God. He still has faith, even in his darkest moments, even when things don't go his way. What a paradigm of faith he is...So many of us, when we are faced with tragedy and disappointments and setbacks question our faith; wonder why God didn't help us or answer us; for many, these kinds of defeats make us question everything about our faith. "I will never cease to rebel against those who committed or permitted Auschwitz, including God," wrote Elie Wiesel in *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. The questions I once asked myself about God's silence remain open. If they have an answer, I do not know it...but like Abraham, Wiesel says he must believe. "You can struggle outside or inside—I prefer to do it inside faith." I imagine Abraham having the same thoughts running through his mind on that early morning as he prayed feverishly to God at that site of destruction...I don't understand you, God. I have so many questions about you, God. But I'm not going to give up on You. I'm going to continue to wrestle and to wonder and to struggle, but I am going to struggle *within* the faith rather than abandon the faith.

This idea is reinforced for me in three seemingly inconsequential words at the end of chapter 18. After Abraham realized that there was no hope of saving S'dom and Gomorrah; that the argument had ended and their fate was sealed, the Torah says, "*V'Avraham shav limkomo*,"

Abraham returned to his place. Why does the Torah have to tell us that? When people talk about Rebecca Etman's bat mitzvah, they're going to talk about her beautiful Torah reading, and her wonderful speech, and how lovely her presence was, they're not going to talk about what time she went home from the Kiddush luncheon. Why do I need to know that after the showdown with God that Abraham went back to his place? According to the midrash, this is no trivial detail at all. What it means is that Abraham went right back to his life of *hakhnasat orhim*, of lovingly, conscientiously welcoming, nourishing, and caring for weary travelers in his tent, as he did at the beginning of the parasha. He returns to his wife and his home. His life does not fall apart; at 99 he's too old to have a midlife crisis, but he doesn't have a senior life crisis or a centenarian crisis; He goes right back to his family, and his life of spreading goodness and kindness in the world.

My dear friends, every one of us has experienced disappointments and things not going our way and some of us have faced a whole lot worse. The question is do we possess Avraham's power to *shav limkomo*, to return to our place, to our lives, to what we know and love; can our lives continue to have meaning, and can we find the courage to push forward, to push past our disappointments to regain a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. May this story of *Avraham Avinu*, our father Abraham, our patriarch, the great architect of our faith give us the strength to follow his example when life's inevitable disappointments come our way.