

On the other side of the mountain

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Have you ever gotten one of those updates on your electronic device that tells you whether your screen time has increased or decreased compared to the week before? If you did a lot of bingeing recently, your screen time will show a major increase; but if you spent a lot of time outdoors, or pursuing hobbies other than Netflix or Hulu your screen time percentage may have gone way down. Well, I have a confession to make: Despite the fact that I spent 15 straight hours working the polls on Tuesday where electronic devices are strictly prohibited, my screen time actually increased this week. By a lot! You see, I basically had the news shows on non-stop in the background almost from the moment I woke up in the morning until I went to bed a night for the past 4 days. A few nights this week I actually drifted off to sleep to the voice of John King and Wolf Blitzer! This has been one of those times when you know that you are living through a pivotal moment in history. When, years from now, scholars and pundits will reflect on what happened in these past several days and how those events impacted the course of the nation and the world. The election of 2020 has been a test of the soul and the stamina of the nation. And the question that I know I'm still pondering is...*What's next?* What will happen now? Not only in the halls of government, but on the streets of our cities, and even among our friends and families who have, at times, been divided and conflicted?

I know I have expressed this amazement before, but I never cease to be astonished by how the *Parashat ha'shavua*, the Torah portion of the week somehow seems to always have something to say about whatever predicament or circumstance we are facing. Parashat Vayeira is no different! No human being ever endured a test quite like Abraham did. The *Akeidah*, the near sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac is meant to be understood as the most extraordinary ordeal any father, any human being could possibly undergo. And we are told *a lot* about the details. How Avraham woke up early to do God's bidding...about how he saddled the donkeys, how he split the wood for the offering, how he selected two young servants to accompany him, how it took three days to get to the destination. We hear the quivering words exchanged between father and son. We witness the knife produced to perform the act. We hear the voice from the heavens and Abraham's response *Hineini!* Nearly every painstaking detail is transcribed, and though we know how the story will end, we hang on every word, and feel the mounting suspense in each verse. Thank God, the crisis is averted at the last moment; a ram is substituted for Isaac, and forevermore Judaism would stand in stark opposition to religious groups that sacrifice human beings on altars of presumed piety. With that point being made in no uncertain terms, you'd think the story could just end there. Compared to the drama, the tension, the panic leading up to the Akeida what more could possibly be said? But the story does not end there. The Torah doesn't only tell us about how they got up to the mountain where this all took place, it also tells us how they got down.

Yayeshv Avraham el na'arav, vayakumu vayeilchu yachdav el Be'ersheva...

Abraham returned to the servants, and they all departed together for the city of Be'ersheva. This is such a seemingly inconsequential detail.

Why do I need to know that Abraham returned to these *na'arim*, these unidentified servants, or that he set off for Be'ersheva?

The great Rav Avraham Ha'Cohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi in the land of Israel commented that Avraham could have sequestered himself after an experience as profound and life altering as the *Akeida*. He could have withdrawn into his own world, and given up on the mission that had animated his life ever since departing from his native home and pursuing his religious mission of convincing the world that there is one God who demands ethical behavior from every human being. The reason, according to Rav Kook, that the Torah relates these quotidian details of rejoining the servants and making the trip to Be'ersheva is to highlight the fact that Avraham went back to work! That he returned to a society that needed to hear his voice and his teachings. That he didn't stay hidden up on a mountaintop, but that he rolled up his sleeves and got back to his mission "of influencing and educating others." In fact if you look closely at the language: *va'yakumu va'yeilchu*, they **rose up** and went; this doesn't only mean that they physically got up to go, but the ordeal, the test actually elevated them and gave them renewed purpose.

I know that some of you are elated by the results of this election, and others of you are disappointed. This has been one long test of our character as a nation. This past week we watched the percentages grow and shrink, maps morph and change colors, projections come and go...we have debated with loved ones and friends, and we may have even lost a few relationships on this altar of national politics. But the question is what now?

The Torah tells us...Abraham models it for us. It's time to *la'kum*, to pick ourselves up, and to get ourselves out of the morass of argument and debate, bickering and squabbling, and start traveling toward Be'ersheva...it's time to get back to work rebuilding our communities and our relationships. It's time to restore trust in government and in each other! You know Be'ersheva has two meanings; one is the *Well of Sheva*, *Seven*. The other is the *Well of Oath*. An oath is a promise, a pledge, a commitment. Abraham goes to the Well of Oath because he made an oath to God to do this holy work in the world. What is our oath to each other as citizens and neighbors? What is our pledge to this country, to this society? What commitments are demanded of all of us, regardless of political party or inclination at this pivotal moment? I think it's time to come down from our mountaintops of ideology, our high places of political orthodoxy, and come back down to Be'ersheva. There's a whole lot of work to be done now...a society to unite, a virus to conquer, a sense of purpose to recapture. This is a moment of Abrahamic proportions, when the journey down the mountain and back to Be'ersheva is at least as important as the test we've all endured. Now, let the journey begin!