Abraham and the Palace Aglow/Aflame
Rosh Hashanah I Morning

Let's talk about Abraham. He appears prominently throughout the liturgy of these Days of Awe as the ancestor to whose memory we wish to appeal for whatever merit it may bestow upon us. This morning, we read Chapter 21 of Genesis, a largely unsavory episode in the saga of Abraham and Sarah. Most traditional commentary on this passage shifts focus from the story itself to concentrate primary attention on the verb *Pakad* in the first verse, the verb meaning "visited" or "remembered." These commentaries correlate this instance of divine remembering of the promise of covenantal continuity through progeny to our desire that God remember us now and for good.

Tomorrow, we will read in the next chapter of Genesis, the provocative Binding of Isaac. Again, most classical commentators emphasize certain aspects of the tale or read in mitigating circumstances to soften the rough edges; most emphasize Abraham's extraordinary faithfulness; some imagine an adult Isaac, also a willing and faithful participant. Such faith as this sits uneasily for many of us. Be that as it may, there are many ways to read with or against this text, but by and large, traditional commentaries seek to demonstrate the merit of our ancestor Abraham and, by our association with him, to apply some of that merit to us as we stand in trial on this *Yom Hadin*, this Day of Judgment, before the Supreme Judge.

This morning, I desire neither to whitewash nor to tarnish Abraham's reputation. I do wish to notice that in Abraham, the Torah presents us with a character of many qualities, some commendable, even noble, others sketchy, from cowardly to criminal. If you desire a religious faith whose founding father exhibits perfection, Judaism will not serve as that faith.

Today I would have us consider a version of Abraham as portrayed in midrash, a subversive Abraham, if you will, one whose qualities of character invite us to take the measure of our own. As most of you know, midrash is the genre of rabbinic literature that emerges when serious students imagine what the written Torah omits and when, impelled by curiosity and awe, those students create parallel worlds of the possible. Midrash constitutes one genre of oral Torah and, as a primary product of the creative human encounter with the sacred texts of earlier tradition, it animates the Judaism about which I care the most. As it happens, because the Torah presents so much rich literary material about him and because that material contains so many lacunae and such intriguing curiosities, the Abraham stories serve as excellent case studies for the teaching of midrash.

To delve into the matter at hand, we note the initial call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1: "*Lech Lecha Mei-artzecha Mimoladetcha Mibeit Avicha* -- leave your homeland, the place of your birth, your father's home and go to a land that I will show you and I will make you great…" What qualities of character suggest Abraham for this divine choosing? What about his resume or personality commends him for selection as the father of a chosen people?

Varied midrashim respond to these curiosities, including some that are no doubt familiar to many in this congregation. Here are two that present an Abraham whose qualities of character could inform our self reflective deliberations as we seek renewal in this New Year. The first of these imagines the kind of person God desired for the role of patriarch.

> The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land…" (Genesis 12:1). Rabbi Isaac said: This [call to Abram] may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *Birah Doleket,* a palace all aglow [or, you could say, in flames]. He [the traveler] wondered, "Is it possible that this palace has no one who looks after it (no *Manhig?*) The owner of the palace looked out and said, "I am the master of the palace." Similarly, because Abraham, our father, wondered, "Is it possible that this world is without a leader (*Manhig*)?" the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, I am the Master of the world." [**Genesis Rabbah 39:1**]

Treating this midrash as a sacred text in and of itself, I would have us explore two different lines of interpretation, each highlighting a distinct trait that might have commended Abraham for being chosen. The interpretive line depends on the understanding of the phrase *Birah Doleket*, the palace either aglow or in flames. In the first understanding of this midrash, Abraham is likened to the traveler who sees a palace aglow. Whereas others might see such an appearance and continue on their way, Abraham reacts with greater attentiveness and curiosity, with what some would call a practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is nothing more or less than the capacity to be where one is, to notice one's life in detail rather than simply letting it pass by. Midrashic Abraham who experiences the world as a palace aglow recognizes the implication of an owner of said palace. In this view, something akin to what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, described as radical amazement characterizes Abe's response to his experience of the world. To put it simply, in attentively perceiving the world, with its many palaces aglow, be they wonders of the natural world or of human endeavor, he perceives its Master and Creator, a Master who, in turn, recognizes him as a partner for covenant.

Turning from Abraham as a practitioner of mindfulness to the second understanding, the one with which I will linger: the midrash compares Abraham to a traveler who sees a palace in flames, a traveler who pauses to inquire after the nature of the burning palace, to check and see if the owner is home, is endangered by the fire or perhaps is controlling its burn. In this version of the midrash God seeks a partner who will notice and attend to calamity, a partner who can perform the work of social justice in a world aflame, who will notice both degradation of the environment and degradation of human beings and will serve as God's emissary in preserving and protecting creation. To the question "what commends Abraham for divine choosing?" the midrash, interpreted thusly, responds with an Abraham whose heightened social conscience will ensure his instinct to transcend the needs of the self.

A second midrash along similar lines builds on a verse from Psalm 45 as it expands on the famous scene in Genesis 18 where Abraham bargains with God over the fate of the city of Sodom. The midrash reads:

> "You have loved righteousness, and hated wickedness, etc. (Psalms 45:8). Rabbi Azariah in Rabbi Aha's name referred the verse to our father Abraham. When Abraham our father stood to plead for mercy for the people of Sodom, what is written in the Torah? [Abraham confronting God after learning of God's intention to destroy the city says:] "That [deed] be far from You to do after this manner." (Genesis 18:25) Rabbi Aha explained [Abraham's argument further, placing this elaboration in Abraham's mouth]: "You [God] have sworn not to bring a deluge upon the world. Would you evade Your [own] oath!? Not a deluge of water would You bring, but a deluge of fire? If so, then You would not have been true to Your oath." [And when Abraham challenges God by asking rhetorically]: "Shall not the Judge of the earth do justly?' (Ibid.), Rabbi Levi [has him elaborate as follows:] "**If You [God] desire the world to endure, there can be no absolute justice, while if You desire absolute justice the world cannot endure. Yet You would hold the cord by both ends, desiring both the world and absolute justice. Unless You forget a little, the world cannot endure.**"
> Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Abraham: "You have loved righteousness, and hated wickedness; therefore God your God has anointed you with oil of gladness above your fellows." (Psalms 45:8)
> [Genesis Rabbah 39:6]

As if the Torah's depiction of Abraham's chutzpa in the scene where he challenges God in the matter of Sodom were not strong enough, this midrash goes further. Not only does midrashic Abraham challenge God to live up to the standards of justice God Godself has established; not only does Abraham remind God that to violate those standards of justice would constitute an evasion of an oath, turning the divinity into a fickle and unreliable deity, something more akin to a Greek god than the Almighty Sovereign of all sovereigns; but the midrash has Abe do something more subtle and more profound. Abraham of this midrash chastises God and in doing so teaches God, as it were, a lesson about how to be Judge over the world. He says, "You, even You, God, cannot hold the cord at both ends. You cannot maintain the world with humanity in it and also insist on absolute justice. If you wish to keep the world with its human occupants, You, God, have to cultivate the capacity to forget." And to the chutzpadig Abraham who would teach God a lesson in the necessity of forgetting, the forgetting of human misdeeds and human failures, God responds with gratitude and appreciation, recognizing in Abraham not only a partner but also a worthy confidant who will speak up in defense of the human species.

We Jews routinely extol the value of memory. However, midrashic Abraham reminds God and us that absolute memory, the kind that enables knowing with certainty what is right and what is just will oft-times run contrary to sustaining relationship. Humanity will not survive in a world of such absolutes. As the Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote:

> In the place where we are right
> Flowers will never grow
> In the spring.
> The place where we are right
> Is hard and trampled
> Like a yard.
> But doubts and loves
> Dig up the world
> Like a mole, a plow.
> And a whisper will be heard in the place
> Where the ruined
> House once stood.

And as for us:

We who would take to heart the teaching of these Abrahams of midrash, may we too strive to notice both the palaces aglow and palaces aflame.

May we on this Day of Remembrance learn to spurn the place where we are right, to cultivate the capacity to forget, even as we remember, and thereby to permit flowers to grow in the spring and a whisper to be heard.

May it be so.