

Parashat Vayera 5774 – Our Community’s Near Death Experience

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I read this story once of a woman, I think it was somewhere in New York, but she was in the hospital having very serious surgery, and while she was under she had a dream in which she saw the image of God. And she got nervous. And she asked God if this was it, if she was going to die during the surgery. And God reassured her: “Oh no,” God said. “You’re going to live at least another 30 years.” So she woke up after the surgery and she felt like a million bucks and she felt reassured. When they were about to release her from the hospital she made an appointment with the plastic surgeon whose office was in the adjacent building.

She went to the plastic surgeon and he drew te circles and said he would make an adjustment here, pull back here, tuck there; and she had the surgery. And the day of the surgery she walked out of the surgeon’s office feeling so renewed and so special, and she walked right in the street and got hit by a bus.

And so she went up to heaven and she saw God again and she complained: “God, what am I doing here? You told me I would live another 30 years.” And God looked at her and said, “Oh My! It is you. I’m really sorry, but I just didn’t recognize you.”

Sometimes it seems like our Torah reading cycle is guided by the divine ... like when it rains on Parashat Noach. Today in Parashat Vayera, we read about the destruction of the evil cities of Sodom and Gemorah in a storm of fire and brimstone. And then we read the Akedah, one of the most dramatic and troubling scenes in the Torah, which describes Isaac’s near death experience, when Abraham follows the divine command to bring his only son up to Mount Moriah, bind him on the altar, and offer him as a sacrifice.

How appropriate a reading for a week that saw the end of the 16-day government shutdown and our near crash through the debt ceiling!

I spent the beginning of the week with 1200 passionate Jews at the annual convention of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, dubbed the Conversation of the Century. And there was very little talk at the convention about what was happening in Washington because people were much more concerned with a different kind of Near Death Experience. Speech after speech referenced the new study of the American Jewish community by the Pew Foundation, which seems to support many of our worst fears:

- The American Jewish community is shrinking;
- The Conservative movement is losing its share of the American Jewish market. Once the largest movement in America, this survey showed that only 18% of the American Jewish population self-identifies as Conservative.

- The next generation is less committed to institutional religion on all levels: less likely to give tzedakkah, less likely to join a synagogue, less supportive of Israel

Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom in Los Angeles – normally a very upbeat person –proclaimed that our house is on fire. He said that it’s time to start screaming. And there wasn’t much sugar-coating from the other speakers either. There was some positive messaging, but nobody imagined that things would turn out well if we just keep doing what we’re doing, if we just imagined like Abraham that we are doing exactly what is right by God.

The Torah doesn’t give a lot of details in its narrative on the Akedah. There are a lot of gaps, which the Rabbis of the Midrash try to fill. As Abraham has his hand raised, the Midrash has the angels screaming at God. “What are You doing? This man Abraham has been so loyal to You. He waited so patiently to have a child. You promised him many descendants, and now You are going to let him sacrifice his son? And he’s willing to do it!” The tears of the angels rained down from heaven and they somehow held back Abraham’s hand. He was unable to go through with the cut. The screams and tears caught God’s attention too and He finally stopped Abraham while the knife was already raised. Isaac picked himself off the altar and proclaimed, “Praised are You Adonai who gives life to the dead, מְחַיֵּה הַמֵּתִים.” In Isaac’s honor, the prophet Jeremiah called the Jewish people “עַם שְׂרִידֵי חֶרֶב, the people saved from the sword”, and indeed Jewish history has seen generation after generation threatened with extinction, only to emerge and continue the chain.

No matter what the numbers say, the Jewish people aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. And I don’t think – as some do – that in another generation all the Jews that are left are going to be Orthodox. But I know that the worst fate is not going to be avoided automatically. We need those angels who are willing to scream, to cry, and to change the trajectory of history.

To cite a few statistics from the study: 94% say they are proud to be Jewish and 75% report a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. About 7 out of 10 Jews report that they participated in a Passover Seder last year, and more than 50% say they fasted on Yom Kippur. These numbers fly in the face of figures in the same study that tell us religion is less and less important in people’s lives and affiliation rates are dropping steadily. They suggest that on the whole Jews care about being Jewish and they are looking for meaning and they want connection ... but they are not sure they can find it in our establishment institutions.

Ron Wolfson, who is a professor at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles spoke at the conference about his new book, *Relational Judaism*. For the past 20 years, he said, the buzzword in synagogues has been programming. Lots of talented people have put out creative programs and invited people to enter the synagogue and participate. And certainly quality programming has been a hallmark at B’nai Israel. But that buzzword needs to change. For the next generation, our focus must be on **relationships**. People might join synagogues to educate their children or participate in a program, but they are only going to **stay** in synagogues if they form relationships. Wolfson talks about the importance of friendly rabbis who reach out and invite people to their homes. But it’s not just relationships with the rabbis and cantors. People need relationships with each other.

This is a friendly congregation. I know that on any given Shabbat lots of people spend more time in the sanctuary talking to each other than talking to God. And that's okay. But we also have to accept the responsibility to talk to the other guy. To quote Rabbi Shira Stuttman of 6th and I, we have to be radically welcoming. When we see a new face, we have to make the effort to say hello – and not just to offer them a membership packet and tell them how easy it is to join. We have to invest in the relationship first ... and then worry about the money. I fear that too often we get it backwards.

And we have to think differently about who the community is. I was struck by one number, which hasn't gotten much attention in the press. According to the study 51% of the Jewish community – more than half – is not married.

What does that number say about our institutions, which are so concerned with reaching out to families? Our membership model is a family model, and the perfect prospective member seems to be – as the sociologist Steven M. Cohen has suggested – a newly married couple who has just given birth to a seven year-old. Now don't get me wrong. Families are important; and my wife and my children are very happy here; and I think B'nai Israel does a commendable job engaging individuals and couples who have graduated past the child-rearing stage. But for those who are not yet married, or those who don't have children, or those who will never get married or have children, or gays, or lesbians or couples who are divorced. ... We can't just wait for them to be ready for us. We have to reach out to where they are. We have to invest in those relationships.

It's not that we ignore them now. But we need to do more. We have a youth director who does fabulous work; maybe we need a young adult director as well. And we need to accept the fact that some of those investments will not pay off fiscally, because we aren't just investing in our bottom line. We are investing in the Jewish future, and there is a lot at stake.

We need angels who are ready to change the trajectory of history.

Dr. Erica Brown spoke at the largest session at the convention, and she offered an interesting challenge. Lots of people in our community speak about the value of Tikkun Olam, Repairing the world, she said. But maybe what we really need right now are people who are willing to go out and do a little damage. We need people who are willing to disrupt the routine in order to initiate change.

That same Midrash about the angels suggests that Isaac's soul actually departed momentarily while he was strapped to the altar. But in the end he emerged stronger. And we will too. We can face the challenge of history. We are up to the task. Not to make Judaism unrecognizable, but this conversation must continue for our sake and for the sake of our children and our children's children, for the sake of Israel, and for the sake of the entire world – which has been so enriched by our unique message. Shabbat Shalom.