



November 6, 2020 – 19 Heshvan, 5781 – Parashat Vayera

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

This past week has been a time of seemingly interminable waiting – sometimes anxiously, sometimes hopefully, always accompanied by considerable unease. The human psyche is not well equipped to deal with uncertainty. We like a world in which the options before us are clear – even when the prospects may be unfavorable. Certainty allows us to assess, to plan, to act. But how do we act – or even contemplate a course of action – when the conditions and options we are facing are unclear?

This is, of course, not a “new” problem under the sun. Humans have been confronting it since ... well, at least since the time of Abraham, if the Torah is to be presented as evidence. Our intellectual and spiritual forebear Avraham Avinu spent almost the entirety of his prophetic career in a state of uncertainty and, often, profound angst. While we know, with 20/20 hindsight, that God’s promise to make the first monotheist the “father of many nations” and the progenitor of a theological revolution would eventually be realized, this was far from clear in Abraham’s own time.

Indeed, a good portion of his dialogues with God – including his willingness to demonstrate his faith through the (near) sacrifice of his son Isaac, about which we read this week in Parashat Vayera – are expressions of Abraham’s deep-seated doubts as to whether his relationship with God was solid, whether God’s promises would be made good. Abraham was a walking cauldron of anxiety – but even in the face of extended uncertainty and profound (self-)doubt, he stayed the course, taking the steps that he understood would lead to the end goals he desired.

We can learn something from our first Patriarch as we ourselves weather the enervating anxiety of this moment in our country’s history, a time when it is unclear if the future we have envisioned and endeavored to build towards will be realized – or will be realized in a meaningful time frame and without collateral damage.

We can learn from Abraham, and from the Jewish tradition more broadly, that our obligation is “not necessarily to see the work through to completion, but at the same time, not to give up trying” (Pirkei Avot 2:21).

The Babylonian Talmud, in Masechet Yoma (84b), speaks of a situation in which a building has collapsed, potentially trapping one or more people inside. From the outside it is impossible to determine if uncovering the ruins will result in the recovery of a survivor, human remains or nothing of mortal value. But the rabbis are unambiguous in their charge: Even on Shabbat (when the dismantling of ruins would normally represent a halachic violation), one is not only permitted but indeed *required* to dig through the ruins until it is certain that there is no hope of recovering a living person.



So, we will continue to wait – anxiously, perhaps; expectantly, in some cases. We will wait for a sign that allows us to discern what it all means to continue our holy work of building the world that we wish our children to inherit.

On that note, I want to remind the congregation that this Shabbat we will be celebrating the bar mitzvah of Solomon Shapiro. I do hope our membership will turn out in force, using the special bar mitzvah service link ([here](#)), to celebrate this joyous milestone and congratulate Solomon on his hard work and mastery of our shared tradition.

Shabbat shalom,

-- Rabbi Rachel Safman