

HIGH HOLY DAY SERMON 5769

Once there was a very rich man. He hired a very learned man, a melamed, to teach his children. Now, in this very same town, there lived also a very wise, Chassidic rebbe, called the Baal Shem Tov – the master of the Good Name. Neither the rich man nor the melamed wanted to get near to this rebbe. This rebbe, however, very much wanted to bring the melamed closer to God and wondered how this might happen.

One night, on erev Shabbat, the melamed dreamed that he was walking along when he came upon a wonderful palace that was elaborately decorated. He could not stop staring at the splendor of the craftsmanship and the design. He was astonished to see that every tiny space of the building contained wisdom and skill that he had never before seen in the whole world.

His heart perceived the great wisdom and he was attracted to it with all his soul. He realized that, since the outside of the palace was so ornate, the inside must be even more so. When he approached the window to look inside, behold, he saw the rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov, and his disciples seated around a table, speaking words of Torah.

He was filled with excitement and wanted to reach

the innermost section of the building. He ran toward the door, but when he wanted to get in, the attendant pushed him aside and wouldn't let him enter. He was deeply upset. However, his desire to hear the words of God was so great, he stood by the window and heard all the holy words of the Baal Shem Tov.

He woke up and began to repeat the words of Torah that he had heard.

But it was midnight and he fell back asleep. In the morning, he got up from bed, realizing that he still remembered the dream, but that the Torah had slipped from his mind. He was so upset and filled with despair, he sat at breakfast looking bewildered.

The rich man offered him a cure for his distress.

"According to the Talmud," he said, "we can get three men to change your dream into a good one."

But the melamed did not answer. He continued to grieve, wishing so very much to go to the Baal Shem Tov, but afraid he would be rebuffed, as he had been in his dream.

Later that day, the Baal Shem Tov was holding forth with his disciples,

when to their great astonishment, he told one of them to fetch the melamed.

When the messenger arrived, and told the melamed, “The Baal Shem Tov invites you to come,” the melamed immediately leapt up and ran without his overcoat like a madman.

Then he heard all the Torah he had heard in his dream and fainted.

When he came to, the Baal Shem Tov said to him:

“If you were hearing new things, you would have reason to be excited.

But this is not new since you heard all this last night.”

The melamed then understood that what had happened was from God.

He followed the Baal Shem Tov from that moment on, and became a truly righteous man.

This story can be understood on many levels. As a Chassidic story, it is about the great inner wisdom of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism who lived in the 18th century.

Chassidism rejected the punctilious nature of Talmud study where scholars entrenched themselves in what is called “pilpul,” an intense textual analysis intended to either explain

differences between various [halakhic](#) rulings or to reconcile apparent contradictions in different texts. A frequently heard accusation is that those who used this method were often motivated by the prospect of impressing others with the sophistication of their analysis, rather than by a disinterested love of truth.

The rich man and the melamed in our story represent these scholars who were very learned but who missed the point of their knowledge which was, ultimately to connect to God.

Chassidism, on the other hand, stressed service to God through joy and spontaneity. The Chassidic rebbe helped his devotees reach communion with God in a variety of ways, including the telling of miracle stories such as this one.

So this story is about the melamed's desire to come closer to truth, to arrive at a more profound understanding of Torah, to connect more authentically with God, and to succeed in this endeavor by becoming a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

He faces a major obstacle however. And that obstacle is fear.

Fear that he will be rejected. Fear that he doesn't have what it takes.

Fear that he does have what it takes and that he will lose everything he already has.

Indeed, when he is finally ready to take the plunge

to become the rebbe's disciple, his excited leap from the rich man's house in which he leaves without his rabbinic overcoat, represents his abandonment of the learning he has acquired thus far.

What he is looking for, the rebbe informs him he already has, he just needs to retrieve it.

Although this is a story about the Chassidim and the power of the rebbe, it is also a story about all of us.

Aren't we all afraid of seeking that deeper truth?

Aren't all of us apprehensive about listening to that inner voice?

We're not sure what it will tell us and whether we can bear hearing its message.

It might tell us to make a major life change,

to pursue a dream we've held in secret.

It might tell us it is time to do teshuvah,

to reconcile with someone we haven't spoken to in years.

We can, of course, try to ignore it, but that will cause us distress.

In the end, we have to be true to ourselves.

Our patriarch Abraham exemplifies this for us.

When Abraham received God's call to leave the land of his birth,

his town and his father's home, God says to him: "Lekh lekha."

Commentators have been struck by this phrase because "lekh" means "go" and "lekha" literally means "to you."

Various translations and interpretations have been given to this phrase,

such as “go yourself,” i.e., “alone,” or just plain old “go.”

But one commentator says it means: “Go to yourself.” In other words, go to your inner self, do what is most authentically you, be true to who you are.

By leaving the land of idolatry and making his way to the Promised Land, Abraham is following his inner call to be faithful to the one and only God.

It involves leaving behind the known and taking a leap into the unknown.

And that is truly terrifying. But God tells him that he will be a blessing.

And what does it mean to be a blessing?

It means to be a righteous individual, operating with integrity and justice in the world and in our relations with others.

It is only when we live according to the promptings of our heart can we offer others the blessing we have given ourselves.

How do we get there? How do we follow Abraham’s journey to himself?

How do we unlock what is buried deep within us?

How do we, like the melamed in our story, get inside the palace?

How do we get past the doorkeeper? It usually involves going through a crisis.

The pain removes the barrier to our inner truth, cuts down our defenses.

The melamed had to experience the agony of his longing

for the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov before he could be invited in.

Abraham had to be alienated from the idolatry all around him before he could hear God’s call.

Because change comes only when we are in enough distress that we are forced to look for an alternative.

An addict or an alcoholic has to hit bottom before he or she is ready to give up the drug or the bottle. The potential loss of a relationship can prompt us to examine our dealings with a friend, a spouse, a parent, a child.

A life that feels sterile and pointless can direct us to the synagogue to seek a connection to God.

The Days of Awe provide us with an opportunity for change.

The constant repetition of our sins, the many hours spent in shul, in study, in prayer, the fasting, the introspection – these serve to awaken that inner voice calling us to our better selves.

This might be the reason the Rabbis chose the reading of the Akedah – The Binding of Isaac – as the Torah reading for Rosh Hashana.

According to the Midrash, Abraham undergoes 10 trials in his life, all of which help him to grow and achieve a deeper understanding of who he is and what his true purpose in life is.

The first trial is his call, followed by famine and wars, circumcision at an advanced age and household jealousy between his wife Sarah and her maidservant Hagar. His inner transformation is attested to by the change of his name from Avram to Avraham, always significant in the Bible.

And finally, the tenth trial, God's order that he sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac.

Eager to show his devotion and piety, Abraham awakens early in the morning and brings Isaac to the designated spot. Only when, knife in hand, his arm lifted over his son, as he is about to strike, does an angel tell him to stop. “Abraham, Abraham.” The angel must call twice, so intent is Abraham to perform the deed.

The traditional understanding of Abraham’s action is that he has given the ultimate proof of faith in God.

I think that Abraham failed the test.

I think that Abraham’s piety went to his head.

So caught up with what a faithful servant to God he had proven to be, Abraham acted, not from his deepest truth, but from the demands of his ego. He wanted to prove himself and was willing to sacrifice those he held most dear. Let’s not forget that Sarah would be devastated by this event.

The Rabbis say that, when she learned of it, she died of a broken heart.

Abraham forgot what it means to be a Jew and a monotheist.

I think that Abraham finally understood what was REALLY important, finally became a real Jew, when he looked down into the face of his beloved Isaac and realized what he was doing.

That’s when he heard the REAL voice of God, the one that told him to stop.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, would say that, seeing the face of the Other called Abraham to his radical responsibility toward his fellow human being.

Don't we know many people, including ourselves at times,
who put work, success, money, power at the top of our agendas while
our families or our inner lives suffer?

Or who place appearances above substance?

Maybe like the melamed, we want to impress ourselves and others
with our knowledge but have no idea how to live a life of true righteousness?

It often takes a tragedy to understand what our true priorities ought to be.

What happens to all the phone calls when the studio executive is laid off?

Who are her real friends?

In a recent movie, *The Bucket List*, Jack Nicholson plays business mogul

Edward Cole, the owner among other enterprises, of a hospital.

Technically, he is in the business of healing and curing people,

but really, he is in the business of making money so that he can afford himself
the pleasures of gourmet meals and fancy wines.

The billionaire playboy has everything he's ever wanted but
nothing he truly needs. He thinks he is happy

but he has no friends and is estranged from his daughter.

Then he discovers that he has terminal cancer, and is forced

by his own hospital regulations, to share a room with another terminal patient

played by Morgan Freedman. Carter Chambers is a philosopher stuck in an auto mechanic's
uniform. This character talks Jack Nicholson

into making a list of all the things he wanted to do in his life

but never got around to doing before he kicks the bucket.

This is Hollywood, so these things include jumping out of an airplane getting a tattoo, and flying around the world.

Ultimately, though, the only item on the bucket list that really counts is the reconciliation with his daughter – and of course the deep friendship he develops with Morgan Freeman.

So my challenge to you, this Rosh Hashanah, is to ask yourself:

What is the barrier keeping you from getting to your truth?

How can you break it down?

And what is on your bucket list?

As Rabbi Hillel said:

If I am not for myself, who am I?

If I am for myself alone, what am I?

And if not now, when?