

RH II – 5777
“Mah Atah Ro-eh? What Do You See?”
October 4, 2016

Overheard in Abraham’s camp, the morning he set out with Isaac.
The two young servants commanded to accompany them are confused:

“Did he say where we’re going?”

“No, didn’t say a word. Just told us to pack up and move out.”

“Guess we better make sure there’s enough food and water!”

“Guess so. I have no idea what is going on in the old man’s head.”

“Got that right!”

“Any idea when we’re getting back?”

“Nope.”

“What am I gonna tell the wife?”

“You’ll be back when you’re back. What else can you say?”

“Well, I don’t know if I like that so much.”

“Gotta another job to go to?”

“Nope.”

“Then get packing. The old man will figure it out for all of us. He always does”

“You sure? We’ve never done anything like this before. He never brings the kid along. What’s he gonna do? Carry supplies? That’s *our* job!”

“No, I have no idea what the kid is going to do! But it’s not like we had other plans for today, do we?”

“But it’s kind of strange, don’t you think? We don’t even know where we are going!”

They both sigh...It’s going to be a long, strange trip.

Because the servants are right, God has not given any directions when Abraham and Isaac leave on their fateful journey, except one. God has commanded Abraham to offer up his son at the place that God would indicate. No GPS. No Google Map. No Waze. Not even a Triptik. No reminder on his cell phone. They simply set out north from Beersheba.

According to the Torah, after three days, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw something. We are not sure what. The text is simple, yet clearly unclear.

It reads: *Bayom Ha-Shlishi, Va-yi-sa Avraham et ei-nav va-yar et Ha-Makom mei-ra-chok.* “On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw *the place* from afar.” (Gen. 22.4)

What place? What did he see? Our most famous commentator, Rashi, quoting earlier rabbis, says that Avraham saw a mountain with a cloud attached from above. Another voice, Rabbi David Kimchi, says that Avraham saw a mountain with pillar of fire on top. Our tradition says doesn’t say who’s right.

The mystery is compounded when we realize that the very word for “the place” in Hebrew, *ha-Maqom*, is one of the rabbis’ favorite names for the essence of God! Did Abraham see an apparition of God and just head for it?

Just what *did* he see? Whether a wisp of cloud or pillar of fire, the Midrash goes on to say that seeing this vision was not for everyone. Here is the Rabbis’ imagined conversation in the traveling party, in paraphrase:

Abraham: Isaac, do you see something out that a-way? *Mah Atah Ro-eh?* What do you see?

Isaac: Why, yes, father, I do! I see a little cloud above a mountain! Or maybe it’s a plume of fire? But there’s something there.

Abraham: Good, son. Hey, servants! *Mah Atem Ro-im?* What do you see? Anything?

Servants: Nope. We don’t see a thing? You see something, boss?

Abraham: Ok, never mind. You stay here with the donkey. You were made for each other.

A bit cold, you think?

Today, this Rosh Hashanah, we are like Abraham, journeying toward a mysterious mountain we call the future, fraught with possibility and danger. Some of us see a lovely cloud perched above our

destination, a sign of hope, favor and better times ahead. Others see an angry flame, threatening to devour us sooner, rather than later.

And some of us don't see a thing. Like the servants, we really can't see the vision of what lies ahead us, either as individuals, or as a sacred community.

Mah Atah Ro-eh? Mah At Ro-ah? What do *you* see? Fire? Cloud? Or nothing at all?

Some of us see fire, a blazing fire that I find terrifying. It is a fire of feeling over thought or fact. This fire endangers us, especially Jews. It threatens us by claiming that because one feels something to be true it is, just because one feels it strongly. This, no matter how strange, bizarre or outright false the belief.

This is the opposite of what Judaism has taught for 2,000 years. Believing something strongly doesn't make it true or even worthy. We're the people who believe in looking at things from every point of view before making up our minds.

Today we are in grave danger from living in what pundits have dubbed a "post-factual world." We Jews depend on there being facts, objective facts we can agree on.

Without facts we Jews are the target of the wackiest, most dangerous conspiracy theories floating on the internet. Everything from Holocaust denial to bizarre rumors that Jews didn't die in the World Trade Center on 9/11 to claims Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians.

No, facts matter, no matter how fiery the feeling may be.

The Holocaust is not up for debate. It is, as a matter of fact, the most recorded event in the entire 20th century. More Jewish diaries, more German government records, more filmed testimony exists on this singular tragedy than any other historical event in the last 100 years. Facts matter. Otherwise we are accused of making it all up for the sake of Israel or an even more sinister international Jewish conspiracy.

Jews died in the World Trade Center. Somewhere between 270-400, about 10% of the fatalities. There was no "memo" to Jews telling them to stay away. It is a figment of someone's warped imagination. Facts matter. Otherwise, hate-mongers blame the Jewish victims and declare them to be the real enemies, rather than the radical Islamic terrorists who perpetrated the act and, indeed, wanted full credit for it!

There is no genocide against Palestinians. In fact, there are more Palestinians today than there were only 20 years ago, 4.5 million now as opposed to 2.5 back then. If this is supposed to be intentional genocide, it is a pretty poor effort. Please don't misunderstand me. There is

unjust suffering and oppression against Palestinians in the West Bank. There is 2nd class status of Palestinians who live in Israel proper.

But for the Black Lives Movement, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement and others to claim with a straight face that there is an intention to exterminate the Palestinians is farcical. Facts matter to us Jews, make no mistake.

It is not enough to feel badly about those who say irrational, dangerous things about Jews. We have to oppose them with facts. If you don't believe, just go out after the holiday and watch the movie "Denial." Professor Deborah Lipstadt had to defend herself from libel charges after engaging with a man who denied the Holocaust. Because of the facts, she won her case.

The fact that I have to say this on Rosh Hashanah is disturbing. You know it. I know it. But those who live in the fabulist, fantasy world of hatred, on the right and the left, simply make stuff up. Their world does not make sense with the facts that we have. So they make up a world that feels better, one that comforts their doubts and fears, one that gives them an enemy to target. Too often, that enemy is us, the Jewish people and our faith.

Mah Atah Ro-eh? What do you see? Fire? Cloud? Or nothing at all?

I see another fire on top of the mountain, the fire of racial misunderstanding. It endangers all of us, even those who insist that they do not have a racist bone in their body. How many more black men will have to die with their hands up before we admit we have a problem here? The bodies are piling up and the anger is rising even higher.

Again, please understand. None of us against the police. We depend on them for our safety and our well-being. But something is wrong. And it has become a fire threatening to go out of control. Just imagine if anyone in this congregation was shot dead in the street in broad daylight with their hands up in the air? It is unthinkable for us, yet far too common for my friends in the Black community.

Mah At Ro-ah? What do *you* see? Fire? Cloud? Or nothing at all?

I see other fires on top of the mountain:

I see war crimes in Syria, more than ½ million dead and none of us unable to stop it, not even we who have declared “Never again.”

I see the attempt of some to deny American citizens their birthright of voting by putting up obstacles we have not seen since the “literacy tests” and “poll taxes” of 50 years ago.

I see policies of the present government of Israel, which I love and visit yearly, which once brought us so close together in heart and mind,

alienating many Jews in North America. From reneging on the agreement for egalitarian access to the Western Wall in Jerusalem to provocative expansion of settlements that threaten the two state solution?

I see the fragmentation of the Jewish community, the decrease in membership of synagogues, the only institution that along with Jewish schools, literally makes Jews instead of requesting from them.

I see warning fires of doubt that every synagogue in our city will survive in the near term, 10-20 years into the future.

Mah atah roeh? Mat at ro-ah? What do you see?

Maybe you see a cloud instead of fire? Do you see reason to hope that we can make our way to a cloud of God's presence and find blessing, favor and a good future? I do, too. The portents are not all foreboding. Even out of the changes shaking the foundations of our community, I see hope.

I see a slimming down of Pittsburgh synagogues as one-stop shopping places for Jewish life. I see specialized programs, some unattached to any synagogue that will attract those who once wanted the ease of knowing that all of their Jewish needs would be met in one place. I see this landscape as one of opportunity for a congregation

committed to progressive values such as ours, from civil and LGBTQ rights to interfaith harmony.

I see a synagogue, our beloved Temple Sinai, that will set aside its long policy of asking for dues commitments leading to membership. I see us working as hard as we can to convince you and others that this community is a community of lived Jewish values, not for the purchase of various and sundry services. We will not allow ourselves to be defined by our transactions, rather our deepest, shared beliefs.

I see Temple Sinai moving into a closer, more collaborative relationship with our partners in liberal Jewish life. These include our friends at Rodef Shalom, the Jewish Community Center, Beth Shalom Tree of Life-Or l'Simcha and the Friendship Circle. We will find more we want to do together, from celebrating holidays and community commemorations.

As more walls become doors, I see us inviting many into our community who have never been here, those who want to sing sacred music with us, those who want to play Jewish music in our band, those who want to explore Israel learning in our Hartman Seminar, those who want to pray in our Shabbat minyan without committing to this shul alone.

I see our kids learning with other non-Orthodox kids here at Temple Sinai and all over our neighborhood. I see a free-wheeling

market of Jewish offerings, especially for our youth. This will compel all of us to bring our A-game if we are to keep our kids connected.

I see us getting more involved in community social justice projects that reflect our highest values taught by Torah: Taking care of the vulnerable, the widow, orphan and stranger is a commandment that appears 36 times in the text. It is an unshakeable obligation.

Some of these will be through our Tikkun Olam Center for Social Justice, but others will be through the vast network of social justice activism in our region, organizations from NCJW to PIIN to Repair the World to the Squirrel Hill Food Bank, for starters.

And I am inspired by this! Our congregation is not here to be frozen in place, but rather to look up to the mountain top and aspire to reach it. Not the place of fire and fear, but the summit of sky, where clouds hover over the tallest peaks. We can see it and be inspired, just as Abraham and Isaac were.

Several years ago we came together to look at where we were going. Thoughtfully, intentionally, our leadership and membership committed to a strategic plan. One feature of it is the declaration that Temple Sinai is not this building, as special as it is. Where is Temple Sinai?

Temple Sinai is found at Audrey and John Brown's house, where the interfaith couples group gathers for its last program every year.

It is found at the Frisbee golf course in Schenley Park where Brotherhood plays.

It is found in the homes of remarkable women who host the monthly Rosh Chodesh group.

It is found at Rick and Carol Rosenthal's house, hosting so many Saturday evening gatherings for Havdalah and meaningful talk among my generation.

It is found in the outings of our Senior Adult group who boldly go all over Western Pennsylvania to places I myself have never been where they marvel at sights and even more, at each other.

Temple Sinai is found in the wonderful trips I've led to Israel over the last 23 years. The next (and maybe the last) is coming up this next June. Come with me to explore Jewish sites, Christian places and difficult areas of the West Bank. June 25-July 5 with an extension to go to Petra in Jordan, if you wish. We are going to where Abraham and Isaac went, according to our holy story, to mountaintop of Jerusalem.

I'll tell you one thing we can't afford. We can't afford to be like the servants who saw nothing. Fire or cloud, we can act, either to protect ourselves or chart an inspired future. But we will not hide our eyes or

bury our heads in the sand. We will not simply be victims, waiting for our destiny to overtake us.

Some mistake Isaac for a victim. After all, he allowed himself to be bound for slaughter. But there is a strong element from our tradition that says that his actions pushed God into acting, to getting Abraham to set down the knife.

No, Isaac represents our hope in the face of the threats we face. He who literally saw the knife in his father's hand, lived a changed life after that moment.

Our tradition diminishes the role of Isaac, preferring to see him as the weaker link connecting two giants, Abraham, his father and Jacob, his son.

But I believe that we, today, identify more with Isaac than his father or son. Abraham is powerful, on an eternal quest for God, one that few of us have the time or inclination to take up. Jacob, more crafty, uses his wits and intelligence to pursue advantage wherever he can, stealing birthright and blessing from Esau, justifying his fraud as God's will.

No, we are Isaac. Especially over the last few years, we have been bruised, but not beaten. We look up to the mountain top as an aspiration, not a place of fire and destruction.

He made peace with his brother Ishmael, he made treaties with local kings, he made possible the future of Jewish life through his marriage to Rebekah and the birth of his twins. He was not afraid to make bold choices, like choosing his younger son, Jacob, for favor and blessing under the cover of his supposed blindness.

Isaac, despite setback and infirmity in old age, is not afraid to dream. He is not afraid to aspire. He is not afraid to look at the world as it is, he has seen the edge of the knife inches from his neck. Despite all of this, *b'chol zot*, he points the way forward for us all.

I stand with those who see lovely cloud above the mountain, the optimists in our midst. The cloud tells us to look up and know that despite the rocky path ahead, we are going to be all right. At the end of the story, the blessing Abraham receives is punctuated with the verse, *And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the LORD there is vision."*

Where is our vision? Are we opening our eyes? What do we see??

Despite the downtrend in Jewish population we optimists look at our values, our passion and our talents move us up the mountain. They are energized by our challenges, no matter what they are.

Our beloved community here at Sinai cannot escape these frightful challenges any more than Abraham can escape God's terrifying command. What do you see when you look out to the horizon? The fire of danger? The cloud of hope? I see a mountain called Adonai-Yireh, because I believe that on God's mountain there is vision – ours!

The recently deceased Israeli leader Shimon Peres had many ups and down in his life. He faced many fires with personal courage and great determination. He succeeded, failed, succeeded and failed again. In the end his hope outlasted his fear. Indeed his hope for peace, for two states for two peoples, outlasts his death. He inspires us even from beyond the grave.

He once declared: "At my age, after looking back, if I feel that I have to make a choice between being experienced and cynical or being curious and innocent, I prefer the second. It is much more appealing."

He also said,

"Sometimes people ask me, 'What is the greatest achievement you have reached in your lifetime or that you will reach in the future?' So I reply that there was a great painter named Mordecai Ardon, who was asked which picture was the most beautiful he had ever painted. Ardon replied, 'The picture I will paint tomorrow.' That is also my answer."

I believe with all of my heart that the picture we will paint together tomorrow will be of the cloud and not the flame.

I look up to the mountaintop and see the beautiful cloud of your faces, so filled with hope and I am inspired. I look up and I see you.

I look up to the mountain, out to the cloud of the future with you and I and Rabbi Gorban and Cantor Berman together as partners and I am inspired.

I look out to mountain top and know that you and I can reach the summit of our vision, if we only are inspired to work together.

I look out to the mountain top and see Isaac, ready to take the next step in the journey, to the next mountain top.

We look out together today toward that summit. What do you see? What *do* you see? What will you see? What will we see – together? A vision for all of us, no servant left behind. A vision worth our toil and trouble. A vision for children and grandchildren to come. That's what I see. *What do you see?*