

The Power of Change

Rosh Hashanah 5784 (Day 2)
Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation
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At a certain point last fall, Julie and I agreed that we were in the middle of our best year in Los Angeles. We loved our little corner of Pico Robertson, called Reynier Village and we had even organized a neighborhood Sukkah hop. Our kids were doing great in their respective schools, Amalya in gan and Yara at the JCC. Socially too, after six years in LA, we finally felt like we had made some dear friends though it had taken time. We were in the same timezone as my family, an easy flight on Southwest or 6 hour drive to Northern California. Our professional lives were stable and we were genuinely happy.

Yet, we also thought it was time for a change. I had long wanted to return to the pulpit and Julie missed the community building as well. We were looking for a place to raise our family and put down roots, and hoping an opportunity would come along.

Fast forward to the spring and finally months of questioning had been answered: Anshe Sholom! We were moving to Lakeview and we were ecstatic.

What followed was breathtaking in its intensity, though it will sound familiar to anyone who has done a cross-country move, especially with small children: piece by piece, we slowly unwound our life in Los Angeles: One car needed to be shipped, another left in with our dear friends. A grand purge of belongings ensued; at one point we simply put a folding table on our front lawn with a sign that said "Free, but please don't take the table." (We figured a folding table might come in handy.)

Of course, there were also goodbyes not only to possessions but to people: I concluded six years at Milken and had to say goodbye to dear colleagues as well as students with whom I had grown very close. For Yara, this was the first year that she had real friends in her pre-school, and now we were asking her to say goodbye, l'hitraot or "see you on FaceTime."

We were so excited for this next chapter in our lives and with this change there was also real sacrifice. We were losing one home just as we were laying the groundwork to build a new one.

The very first thing we learn about our patriarch Avraham is that he moved to a new place: *לְךָ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ*. *Go, from your land, your birthplace and*

your father's house. While the midrashim are quick to portray Avraham as an iconoclast, completely out of step with the context of his birth, I imagine that the reality was more nuanced. (Who knows, maybe Avraham had a beloved coffee shop in Ur Chasdim that he was sad to say goodbye to.)

Throughout his life, Avraham must have been changing and growing as well. Most noticeably, Avraham's name changed, as did Sarah's. The pasuk I just read starts, וַיֹּאמֶר, ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, "God said to Avram, go from your land..."

Interestingly, these two conditions - changing one's name and traveling to a new place are also indicators of someone doing Teshuva, as the Rambam says in Hilchot Teshuva (2:4). While Avraham may not have been actively doing *Teshuva* as a form of repentance (contrary to what I suggested yesterday), he certainly was growing and changing as a person, reflected in Rambam's teaching.

Real change is rarely easy and Avraham was no exception. Our sages saw Avraham's life as a series of tests on the road to becoming the paragon of ethical monotheism and forefather of the Jewish people. Pirkei Avot (5:3) articulates it like this:

עֲשָׂרָה נִסִּיּוֹנוֹת נִתְּנָסָה אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם וְעַמֵּד בְּכֻלָּם, לְהוֹדִיעַ כְּמָה חֲבָתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם:

With ten tests Abraham, our father, was tested - and he withstood them all, showing the great love for Abraham, our father - peace be upon him.

One of the tests (according to Rambam's commentary on Pirkei Avot 5:3) was leaving Ur, his homeland; another was his relationship with Hagar. There are some debates among the commentators about which exact events in Avraham's life represent which test. However, there is near universal agreement that the story we read this morning, *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, was Avraham's greatest test. The language in the Torah is unequivocal, using a rare word: *nisa* as the key verb:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹקִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם

Some time afterward, God tested Avraham, saying to him, "Abraham." He answered, "Here I am."

As we know, Avraham ascends the mountain, first with servants and then continues further with just Yitzchak. An altar is built and a terrifying scene unfolds.

The Midrash (Midrash Rabba 56:8) imagines the pivotal moment up on Mount Moriah like this:

Avraham sent his hand to take the knife and his tears fell onto the eyes of Itzchak. Nonetheless, Avraham's heart was happy to do the will of his Maker.

The angels gathered in many groups above them...

What did the angels yell out? 'The ways have become desolate, the wayfarer has ceased; God has rescinded His covenant; He has become disgusted with the cities' (Isaiah 33:8) – He does not desire Jerusalem and the Temple that he had in mind to pass down to the children of Itzchak.

According to the Midrash, the angels are screaming out at this moment, angry at God. 'The covenant that you forged with Avraham - it's no longer in effect if Yitzchak is sacrificed! It's null and void.' It must be that God no longer desires this relationship with Avraham and his progeny, if his son is to be sacrificed!

The midrash continues:

Rabbi Acha said, "Avraham himself started to wonder, 'All these words are bewildering. Yesterday, God told me (Genesis 21:12), "In Yitzchak your descendents will be called." And [then] God went back and said, "Please take your son." And now God, You say to me, "Do not send your hand to the youth." It is bewildering!'

The midrash paints an incredible scene, one which we might have thought heretical. At the binding of Isaac, the angels assume the covenant is no longer in effect. Avraham is himself confused and torn about how to proceed. Finally, quoting Psalms,

The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'Avraham, "I will not profane My covenant and the utterances of My lips, I will not change" (Psalms 89:35) –

לֹא־אֶחָלֵל בְּרִיתִי וּמִוְצֵא שְׁפָתַי לֹא אֲשַׁנֶּה:

"I will not violate My covenant, what my lips have uttered, I will not change." And here the Midrash goes even further:

When I said, "Please take your son," I did not say, "slaughter him," but rather, "and bring him up."...I said to you, "Bring him up," and you have fulfilled My words. And now, bring him down.'

In this rabbinic retelling, Avraham failed the test! The test was not to actually sacrifice Yitzchak, but to bring him up. "You brought him up, now bring him down!"

The Sefat Emet, the great Hasidic Rebbe of Ger (19th C. Warsaw), put it this way: “Avraham misunderstood God’s true intention. God never wanted the sacrificial act to occur. Rather, God’s command to sacrifice was testing Avraham’s will to sacrifice his son, not actually murdering him!”

After a lifetime of challenge and change according to this reading, Avraham failed the final test. His commitment to God erased his moral compass. Avraham lost himself. He had changed too much and gone too far, becoming a blind servant of God.

In this moment, it is God, who replies, that no, our covenant and relationship is fundamental at this point, I will not change it, I will not transgress it - לֹא אֶשְׁנֶה - I will not change.

This reading of the *Akeidah* raises a fundamental question for us:

Change involves sacrifice, for we must give something up in order to create something new. Moving to Chicago meant giving up our life in Los Angeles. If we choose to run a marathon, it may mean many hours away from our family. If we take on a new role in our professional lives, we may need to sacrifice our ego as we learn the ropes.

But what if we change so much that a core part of us changes beyond recognition, as these commentaries suggest happened to Avraham?

Can we change without losing ourselves in the process?

In *Orot HaTeshuva* [the Lights of Teshuva], Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the Jewish community in mandatory Palestine) sets forth two different paradigms of Teshuva (2:2). He writes,

לְגַבִּי מִשְׁדַּךְ זְמַנָּה, הַתְּשׁוּבָה מִתְחַלֶּקֶת לְשְׁנֵי חֲלָקִים: תְּשׁוּבָה פְּתְאוּמִית, וְתְשׁוּבָה הַדְּרָגִית...

Regarding its length of time, teshuva may be divided into two types: sudden teshuva and gradual teshuva. Sudden teshuva comes as a result of a spiritual lighting flash that enters the soul. In a single moment, a person recognizes the evil and ugliness of the sin and they are transformed into another person.

To be sure, there are powerful moments in life which change us. Certainly, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we even hope and yearn for one of these spiritual lighting bolts. Afterall, that is the purpose of the shofar, as the Rambam says (Hilchot Teshuva 3:4), עוֹרֵר יְשָׁנִים מִשְׁנֵתָּכֶם, “you who sleep, rouse yourselves from your sleep, and wake

up, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator!" We hear the shofar and it has the power to transform us, to wake us and shake us up!

However, Rav Kook says that there is another kind of Teshuva, תשובה הדרגית:

There is also gradual teshuva. There has not flashed within this person a lightning bolt that would cause a transformation from the depth of evil to good. But the person feels that they must engage in a process of improving their ways and paths in life...and in the course of this, they proceed little by little along the upright path, fixing their traits and improving their deeds, teaching themselves how to grow more and more worthy as they approach a higher level of refinement and rectification.

Imagine if we tried this in some areas in our life: Every day I want to be a slightly better partner, a slightly better Jew, a bit better as a colleague, a better Chicagoan. These would be tiny tweaks, but over time, they would add up. In case you're wondering what this accrues to: if you commit to improving 1% each day, for 365 days, it's a 37% increase over the course of a year.

Of course, the concept of gradual change is not uniquely Jewish and appears in the secular world as well. As it turns out, this idea played a key role in an unexpected setting: British Cycling.

In his book "Atomic Habits," James Clear tells the story of the British Cycling program. Clear writes that "the fate of British Cycling changed one day in 2003."

The organization...had recently hired Dave Brailsford as its new performance director. At the time, professional cyclists in Great Britain had endured nearly one hundred years of mediocrity...with just a single gold medal at the Olympic Games, and having never won the Tour de France...

...What made Brailsford different from previous coaches was his relentless commitment to a strategy that he referred to as "the aggregation of marginal gains." Brailsford said, "The whole principle came from the idea that if you broke down everything you could think of that goes into riding a bike, and then improve it by 1 percent, you will get a significant increase when you put them all together."

Brailsford and his coaches...redesigned the bike seats to make them more comfortable and rubbed alcohol on the tires for a better grip...The team tested various fabrics in a wind tunnel and had their outdoor riders switch to indoor racing suits, which proved to be lighter and more aerodynamic.

But they didn't stop there. Brailsford and his team continued to find 1 percent improvements in overlooked and unexpected areas...They hired a surgeon to teach each rider the best way to wash their hands to reduce the chances of catching a cold. They determined the type of pillow and mattress that led to the best night's sleep for each rider. They even painted the inside of the team truck white, which helped them spot little bits of dust that would normally slip by unnoticed but could degrade the performance of the finely tuned bikes.

As these and hundreds of other small improvements accumulated, the results came faster than anyone could have imagined.

...Just five years after Brailsford took over, the British Cycling team dominated the road and track cycling events at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, where they won an astounding 60 percent of the gold medals available. Four years later, when the Olympic Games came to London, the Brits raised the bar as they set nine Olympic records and seven world records...

Small changes, repeated over time can have a huge impact. So the question becomes, what small change could we make in our lives, not in the coming year but even in the coming week, or even today?

When thinking about the internal work of this season, the rabbis employ the term *Teshuva*, which while many might translate as repentance, really means a *return*.

Teshuva in its essence is not repentance or an apology. Rather, the way to return to God is the return to ourselves. This is not always glorious and more often than not, it is slow and gradual work. But we would be foolish to ignore its power for it has one distinct advantage: as we slowly change 1% of ourselves, the other 99% remains intact. We can change, without losing our very essence in the process.

There is a famous paradox known as the Ship of Theseus. It goes like this: imagine a ship made out of wood. Over time, each oar, floor board, mast and every other element is replaced, one by one. Is it still the same ship?

Some might say yes, it is the same ship. Others might say no. It turns out that both are right. If you change bit by bit, eventually you will be totally different, ultimately becoming the truest version of yourself.

Shana Tova.