

Rosh Hashanah 5767

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[Note: Sermons are meant to be experienced in an interaction between rabbi and community. This one is no exception. What follows are the ideas and concepts conveyed and an approximation of the words delivered.]

“Do You See What I See” or “Wake Up and Say a Brakha”

I would like to share a beautiful teaching, a midrash, with you on today’s Torah portion. The Torah says: *[Genesis/Bereshit 22:3-4]:*

בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֵק. וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו
שְׁבוּ-לָכֶם פֹּה עִם-הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנְּעָר נֵלְכָה עַד-כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁוֹבָה אֵלֵיכֶם.

4Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far away. 5And Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come back to you.”

Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place...what did he see such that he knew that was the place? And why did he not take his servants with him? The Torah doesn’t tell us what or why. So the ancient Rabbis cleverly and creatively interpreted the Torah and made a new point. *[Bereshit Rabbah 56:1-2]*

ור' לוי אמר בזכות של יום שלישי של אברהם אבינו שנאמר ביום השלישי וירא את המקום מרחוק מה ראה ראה ענן קשור בהר אמר דומה שאותו מקום שאמר לי הקב"ה להקריב את בני שם: אמר ליצחק בני רואה את מה שאני רואה א"ל הין אמר לשני נעריו רואים אתם מה שאני רואה אמרו לו לאו אמר הואיל וחמור אינו רואה ואתם אין אתם רואים שבו לכם פה עם החמור

One the third day of his journey, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place at a distance, which God had told him. He noticed upon the mountain a pillar of fire reaching from the earth to heaven, and a heavy cloud in which the glory of God was seen. And Abraham knew this was the place God told him to offer his son up as a sacrifice. Abraham said to Isaac, “My son, do you see on that mountain in the distance what I see?” And Isaac answered and said to his father, “I see, and, lo, a pillar of fire and a cloud, and the glory of Adonai is seen upon the cloud.” Abraham then asked the two servants, “Do you see what upon the mountain what I see?” They answered, “No.” Abraham said to them, “Stay here with the donkey, for you are like the donkey--as little as it sees, so little do you see.”

Did God reveal something to Abraham and Isaac but not to the servants? No, God did not alter or manipulate the natural world. Neither was it that their eyes didn’t work: who could miss a pillar of fire and the glory of God...in fact, all of them saw that exact some stuff...a beautiful sunset over a mountain, streams of sunlight bursting through the purpled and deep pink clouds. The eyes of Abraham, Isaac, the two servants, and even the donkey, all work equally well. The difference was what their

hearts and souls were able to see. To see God is to see blessing or meaning or purpose in the regular, mundane matters of daily existence. Imagine being so sensitive to world around you that you could perceive blessings and holiness, or, in simple terms, God, in the everyday. Wouldn't that be an enriching life?! A spiritual version of stopping to smell the roses.

But most of us are rushing through life like we were gulping down fast food. We'd like to go slow-- we'd like to take the time and smell roses, savor the coffee, and admire the full moon; take a walk holding hands with a loved one, and discover the little blessings of daily life. We'd like to write some snail mail -- a hand written card to a loved one is much more romantic than an e-mail. But it's a drive thru Starbucks and a plastic flower on the dash board of life because I gotta check my e-mails, return a thousand calls on my cell while I get to my kid's soccer game, bar mitzvah lesson, music lesson, or get myself to work, to some meeting, to pick up the dry cleaning, to the gym....then run home to pop the pre-packaged frozen food in the micro-wave, or tonight... let it be drive-thru.

“I'm livin' in the fast lane baby, and lovin' it!”

Ain't it true?! I know I love the full, exciting life with the adrenalin pulsing through my veins. I am busy doing great things and feeling so alive. Yet, there is a cost to the fast paced, fast food life.

We live in a world that is going on cruise control in the fast lane where a war only last 34 days, where everything is just a double click away, where cell phones demands immediate response such that we don't even turn them off when we come to services to pray—we just put 'em on vibrate. A world where they are marketing pick-up drinks with twice the caffeine and twice the sugar to keep us going 24/7, where we are in such a rush that the sneaker is emerging as high fashion, and world where courting has been replaced with speed-dating. Who has time for a leisurely dinner and walk when you can meet 8 great folks in 30 minutes and that's sufficient to finding a marriage partner—*insta-relationship*, just add water!

And yes, with this fast paced world comes the fast food expectation of instant gratification: “getting your way” means getting it now. “I want my food NOW.” “I want to be entertained NOW.” “I want to lose 10 pounds NOW.” “I want my shot of spirituality NOW.” Patience and discipline has been thrown out the second story window. Yet in this fast lane/fast paced/fast food world...the tortoise is making a comeback—watch out you *wascally wabbit!!!*

Take for example supply-and-demand market explosion of yoga and relaxation classes creating the anxiety-producing rush to slow down. A New York Times article describes how “several days a week at 1 pm, clients come running from their offices into the *Back in Shape* studio in midtown [New York] for relaxation classes. Some

have peeled of their clothes off on the sidewalk.” Marjorie Jaffe, who owns the studio, said: “Their lives are so hurried that they have to schedule their relaxation”...At the end of the relaxation hour, as she is telling students to close their eyes and imagine themselves drifting on clouds, the doorbell to her studio starts ringing with students for the next class, “You better get off your clouds now,” Ms. Jaffe always says as everyone dresses and hurries back to work.

No wonder the enlightened few of us have escaped the fast-paced western world for the meditative hilltops of the east (or rush off to the yoga matt for our scheduled hour of karma adjustment). By now you’ve probably heard the joke about the Jewish grandmother from New York who makes a difficult trip to the Himalayas to see a guru. ‘What does a Jewish grandmother want with a guru?’ you ask. Well, after encountering many obstacles and delays on her long journey, she is finally ushered into the master’s presence and has only three words to say: “Sheldon, come home.”

We don’t have to search the far east for a spiritual life; just pull out of the fast lane. Perhaps the answer is right at home. We have a tradition that protects what is good in our lives, and it has its own unique culture. It’s called Judaism. And it may be more accessible to you than you think.

I remember once explaining to my teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, [one of the greatest theologians of the past generation] that I did not grow-up in a very Jewish environment. I mean no synagogue affiliation, no religious school, no Bar Mitzvah, no High Holy Days...

He said it was not true that I didn’t grow up very Jewish. Then he asked me what my family’s dinner table was like. I said the usual stuff: “how was your day?”, “I talked to grandma today and she said...”, “Can you believe what’s happening in *some foreign country?*”, “Did you see that article in today’s paper?” or “Don’t blame me—I didn’t vote for him.”

He said: “Very Jewish!” Indeed, it was.

What happens around our dinner tables is very Jewish.

Thanksgiving is not about the turkey and Pesach is not about the gefilte fish. And Jewish spiritual life cannot be reduced to how much Torah you know, how often you show up at synagogue to pray, nor by how kosher you eat.

A long, slow family meal, as well as all quality time spent together, makes life rich and nourishing, and is the root of a deeply spiritual life.

Rabbi Simchah Bunam, the great Chassidic master, said to his followers: Our great transgression is not that we commit sins--temptation is strong and our strength is slight! No, our great transgression is that at every instant we can turn to God--and we do not turn!

Our problem is not that we are missing on the great moral principles of Torah—we know we are good generous people with strong moral character; we care about our families and communities. We are not losing out on the great ethical lessons of Judaism. Our problem is that we are missing out on the holiness of even the seemingly mundane moment, like having a necessary meal, like spending time, real time, undivided attention time with those we love. Rather we are sacrificing it on the altar of the urgent.

Did you know that the Jewish tradition has special blessing for all sorts of simple mundane things to aid us in mindful living: blessings for eating bread, cake, cookies, vegetables, fruit...and we take time to add a special blessing when we bit into the first peach of the new season. We have a blessing for smelling flowers, for building a protective railing around our roof, for hearing thunder, and for seeing lightening, a rainbow, a comet, an impressive mountain and an expansive sea; a blessing upon seeing a beautiful person and another for seeing an exceptionally “unusual” looking person. A blessing for hearing good news, for hearing bad news, for putting on new clothes...the rabbis even argue about which shoe you should put on first and they ultimately decide it doesn’t matter as long as we slow down, pay attention, and stop urgently rushing through life.

It is like the Zen master who enters a village and sees people scurrying about. “Where are you running?” he asks.

“To make a living,” they respond.

“Why are you so sure that our living is in front of you?” he probes. “Maybe it’s behind you and can’t catch up. Do not run to make a living, be still and live.” Be still and live.

I would like to offer 2 suggestions for us to facilitate discovering the blessings in our lives:

1. Live mindfully. So many of us sleepwalk through life...how many times have you gotten in the car and all of a sudden you’re home? What of significance happened to you last Tuesday? What did I do Tuesday...I have no idea. Rabbi Meir taught that each of us should say a hundred blessing each day [Menachot 43b]. Imagine recognizing a hundred blessing in your life everyday: my child said good morning without being prompted, my kid called for know reason, the checkout person at the store smiled at me, the guy I cut off rushing to synagogue didn’t flip me off...blessings abound if we only take the time to notice.

My suggestion is to take Rabbi Meir's advice seriously: say a hundred blessing a day. Carry a little notebook and makes notes of the blessing you experience each day. and if you're not going to be able to write them down, say them in a voice just loud enough for your own ears to hear....thinking it is not enough, you must do something more. Don't worry if you don't get to 100 a day. Just actively live mindfully.

How do you think you would be if you genuinely did this everyday for two months? More appreciative, grateful, content, relaxed, happy, spiritually aware. If you think you'd benefit or be transformed by such an exercise, then do it. Seriously. And in two months, please get in contact with me and let me know how you experience your life differently.

2. My second suggestion is to embrace the most transformative contribution the Jewish tradition has given the world: Shabbat. Please know that watching your children play sports or musical instruments or perform in the school play or whatever they do, while necessary, is not sufficient. I have learned that what has and continues to hold my family together is sharing a long meal, a nice bottle of wine, and good conversation. Eating together builds community and enforces belonging; it strengthens our love for each other and creates the precious memories the make life rich. While the meal is great, Shabbat is not about the food. Let's spend unstructured time together with the people who are near and dear to us. And this never includes watching anything on a screen or simply watching your kids play soccer.

My teacher Rabbi Berk shared a profound truth with me: *Years from now, sports will not be what holds your family together.* Let's invest in what truly sustains us.

Perhaps the antidote to our fast food, fast-paced, fast lane lives is to rediscover what Abraham and Isaac saw on that mountain: our simple everyday existence has potential to bring spiritual nourishment if we would only take the time, see the blessings, share a long meal together, and, perhaps, take in a sunset.

L'shanah tovah u'metukah. May your New Year be good and sweet to taste.