

“V'tein Helkeinu B'torateicha - Grant Us a Share in Your Torah”

Recently, my family and I had the opportunity to travel to New York City. Aside from the obvious tourist attractions, one of the highlights for us was visiting the Tenement Museum in the Lower East Side. Located at the intersection of Delancey and Orchard Street, the museum is inside one of the original tenement buildings that housed large families in small apartments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through the exhibit, one learns firsthand about Jewish life in the New World that many of our grandparents and great grandparents experienced as they immigrated to this country.

We toured one of the apartments, which was complete with furnishings and household items in use at the time. During our tour, we had the privilege of meeting and speaking with an actress who portrayed the real life Victoria Confino, a 14 year-old Sephardic Jewish immigrant from Greece. She led us into her small apartment where 10 members of her family slept, and together we traveled back in time and imagined that we were living with her in 1916. The young actress nailed the part. Victoria's English accent was broken as she talked about living a new life in this country. And she felt very comfortable answering questions, showing photographs, and sharing true details about her family. Victoria talked about how the family came together for Shabbat each week, and how they kept their Jewish values even as they experienced this new world. My visit into Victoria's apartment left me feeling closer to what American Jewish life must have been like at the dawn of the 20th century. In an instant, the present and the past fused together - and when I physically Crossed Delancey street, I not only went back in time, I came home again.

Albert Einstein taught that “the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” When we were sitting in Victoria's apartment, there was a moment that transcended time, when everything was one and there was no distinction between past and present. As life continues for us at breakneck speed, how do we slow down and capture those precious moments of transcendence? How can our faith help us hold on to these times and provide greater meaning in our lives?

Part of our Amidah prayer focuses on “Kedushat HaYom,” the Holiness of the Day. When we pray, we thank God for the gift of each day. We say, “v'tein chelkeinu b'torahtecha, may each of us find a portion of Torah that is ours.” Finding a portion of Torah just for us - what does this mean? If we looked into Torah and found something meaningful, something that resonates within us and allows us to transcend time and space - how closer might we be to understanding God and our existence in this world? If we could do this, then Torah would be elevated beyond a mere written scroll, or even an oral document that has been passed from generation to generation. Torah would become a living document - one that is central to our

lives and our experiences. Embracing Torah as a living document, would enable us to notice it at every moment of our lives.

This doesn't have to be a daunting task. By examining some of our familiar stories we can find our own portions of Torah. With fresh eyes and new perspectives we can embrace the legends of our people in different ways. They serve as our inspiration and an important launching point for how we bring Torah into our lives. By engaging in deeper reflection, we can discover new ways of connecting to our faith for the present.

We begin with our patriarch Abraham, found in Bereshit, Genesis. His life is full of challenges and tests of faith. Perhaps the greatest test of all is the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. As we read this story on Rosh Hashanah, one question seemed to burst forth: How could Abraham nearly sacrifice the life of his son? Looking at this story as 21st century Jews, we may realize that the story is really about making sacrifices on behalf of our children. Understanding the meaning of the story rests in defining the meaning of sacrifice for us today.

Raising well-rounded children in this day and age has become increasingly difficult. There is no shortage of advice on diets, medications and academic guidelines. But, where has all of this supposed help taken us? Great challenges exist for our children, more than ever before: depression, feelings of inadequacy, and anxiety. In addition there is intense competition and overwhelming uncertainties about their future. Children today are dependent on technology and the Internet to mask feelings of loneliness. Shouldn't we be better able to handle these challenges with all of our perceived modern advancements? So what should parents do? How do we make sure to protect our children in these uncertain and increasingly difficult times? Parents need to find the balance between being that helicopter parent on the one end and being completely absent on the other. And there are plenty of examples on both extremes.

How could Abraham endanger Isaac's life? Because of his faith in God. He didn't question that God outlined the proper path for him to take. Today, we search for God in other ways. As parents, we wrestle with helping our children make the best choices for themselves, and sometimes we also need to give them extra support and help. Recently, I received a call from a mother who revealed to me that her daughter was undergoing treatment at a mental health facility. During our conversation she shared that her daughter was searching to reconnect with her faith and to understand her Jewish identity. I spoke with the young teenager, and I discovered that what she was ultimately looking for was her own portion of Torah, one that she could claim for herself. For this young woman, Congregation Beth Israel was a safe place that she remembered fondly from her youth. In her days as a student at The Shlenker School, she craved a way to return to the familiar halls and faces of this sacred space. We shared some great opportunities for ways she could return, including joining with dozens of other teens in the congregation on Sunday mornings as part of the madrichim, or teaching assistants, program. Or to participate as a student in Kehillah High, our community-wide supplemental high school program where teens select their own teachers and topics. This was

the living Torah that was reachable for her, which she is pursuing, as she continues on her own path towards healing.

Our tradition also teaches that the Akedah story is a metaphor. Isaac's name in Hebrew means "and he laughed." Perhaps in the moment when Abraham was able to sacrifice his son, these two souls merged into one. There was no difference between parent and child. There was only the hope of a better life if Abraham could let go or sacrifice some of his own shortcomings. Parenting today requires laughter and also patience. Reaching out for help and advice is connecting to one's own portion of Torah. It is a way towards acceptance and unconditional love.

The story of Abraham is one portion of Torah that connects parents to children on the theme of sacrifice. The story of Moses is a second portion of Torah that also deserves attention. In the book of Exodus, we witness an encounter between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro or Yitro. As Moses is maturing in his leadership role, he develops a close relationship with his father in law. Yitro is a Midianite Priest - not an Israelite. But the Torah emphasizes the closeness between these two communities. Yitro is interested in learning more about Adonai, and he also wants to support his daughter, Zipporah, Moses' wife. So it seems only natural for Yitro to step in and offer some advice to his son-in-law Moses.

Can any of us relate to our in-laws stepping in for unsolicited advice??

While Moses bears the burden of leadership alone, Yitro implores him to take a different approach. He tells his son-in-law, "This thing you are doing isn't right. You will surely wear yourself out, and the people as well. This task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." (Exodus 18:17) In a deeply personal moment, Yitro takes notice that Moses has become a workaholic with no balance in his life. Moses needs a full assessment of what he can do and what he can't. Rashi, an 11th century commentator, teaches that Yitro held the Ruach Hakodesh- the Holy Spirit within him. Although a Midianite, Yitro picks up on the important value of deepening one's connection to family.

Family dynamics are often tense. We search for those moments when we can find the support and help we need. Too often, we may become frustrated when our extended family lends unsolicited support. But it can also be the highest form of unconditional love.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, our community was broken and in tremendous need. We saw the flooding of our own homes and those of our neighbors. Our city was literally in shambles, and today many areas are still in the process of rebuilding. Physically and spiritually, we were devastated. But the outpouring of concern and support that we received from the Jewish Federation and communities across the country was overwhelming. We even received help from the State of Israel and from Israeli humanitarian organizations. Specifically, Nechama, an organization devoted to assisting all those in need following a natural disaster, was stationed in Houston. Month after month, I saw the blue and white Nechama trailer parked at the Presbyterian Church on Bellaire Blvd. The effects of Harvey didn't discriminate

between race or religion. So, Nechama's response to the disaster was to help anyone and everyone. Why? Because that's the Jewish way. Because we are one family and one community. By living and extending the values of Torah to others, we grant them their portion of Torah that restores and heals.

The portions of Torah that describe Abraham and Moses connect to us individually, and through our families. A final portion of Torah connects us from one generation to another. At the end of the Book of Genesis, we read about Jacob who blesses his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe, the sons of Joseph. Jacob is now an old man and near the end of his life. But he prays that his grandchildren and the generations to follow will carry out his legacy. Ephraim and Menashe receive Jacob's ethical will, filled with his hopes and dreams as they continue to grow and thrive for themselves. It is the first moment when we see a grandfather bless his grandchildren. Perhaps it's because this is the first pair of siblings in Torah whose relationship is solid and strong. Their connection to their grandfather is absolute. We continue to honor the names of Ephraim and Menashe today when we bless our sons on Friday evenings during Shabbat. They model what we hope for today- the prayer that our children and grandchildren will find their home with the Jewish People.

During our B'nai Mitzvah services we include a ritual known as Torah transmission. We physically pass our Torah scroll through the family line. From great-grandparents all the way to the bar or bat mitzvah student, every family member holds on to the scroll as it passes l'dor vador, from generation to generation. At a recent Bat Mitzvah service, one grandfather reflected proudly on the experience. Without question the service was moving and meaningful, and he later wrote that for him it was about witnessing the 3rd generation of his family take her own rightful place on the bimah with Torah. Granting the gift of faith to a grandchild is the most valuable legacy one can give. It doesn't expire. It doesn't require a good Wifi connection. Creating a spiritual connection with family based on faith is irreplaceable.

Sometimes, families choose the path of Judaism for themselves, when one member embarks on the journey towards conversion. When I speak with these individuals, I am always struck by their deep commitment. For many, the desire to become Jewish has been part of them for many years. And, for others, life experiences draw them closer to our faith. Recently, as part of the conversion process, one student discussed with me his reflection on Milton Steinberg's work. Steinberg, a modern Jewish theologian, taught that each person must create his or her own relationship with God and ultimately Torah - in a sense to find his or her own portion of Torah to live each and every day.

On this sacred day, we seek the portions of our Torah that are most meaningful to us. In our own lives, have we strayed too far from where we'd like to be? Are there moments when we haven't been open to bringing Torah into our lives because we were too scared or felt too ignorant? By examining the stories of our ancestors in deeper ways and with fresh perspectives, we can find ourselves in their stories too. We can also find places that instruct

us how to connect to an ancient and sacred text. We must continue to search and find our own portions of Torah.

This morning, we read from Deuteronomy, Nitzavim, which emphasizes the importance of standing together. We are a part of a sacred brit- a covenant. We've taken this step together, now it's time for us to continue our own journeys. From our weekly Torah study classes, to our scholars-in-residence, and to advocacy for Jewish causes, living Torah can be fulfilled within this community and throughout our congregation. With efforts of inclusion and social justice, Torah remains our continued inspiration.

Ultimately, the illusion of the past, present, and future fuse together, and much like Victoria Confino's tenement house on the Lower East Side, this Sanctuary in Meyerland is for us a place to gather, to celebrate, and to discover our own portion of Torah.

Now we prepare ourselves to renew our commitment to our faith and our community. Our tradition has depth, authenticity, and meaning to anyone who seeks it. We pray for the strength to open our hearts as we stand ready v'tein helkeinu b'toratecha, to be granted our portion of Torah.

Ken Yi HI Ratzon. May this be God's will.