

## Speaking Up

The traditional Torah portion that accompanies a Rosh Hashanah service, albeit on the second day, is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac where the patriarch Abraham is called upon by the biblical god to sacrifice his son Isaac and who is prepared to do so without a single word of protest. Simply describing that story suggests the horror of both the demand and the response. But we will defer that portion until next week. Instead, I want to explore with you another story in the Abraham narrative, a story that comes before the Akedah. In Genesis 18, Abraham argues with the biblical god in order to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He attempts to negotiate, cajole and even shame that god to reconsider his plan to destroy the entire cities. Words of protest indeed, speaking truth to power represented by the ultimate biblical authority. Perhaps this is an Abraham worth emulating. Our tradition holds that it is this very argument that earns Abraham the status of patriarch, instead of Noah who is described as only being righteous for his time.

Genesis 18, beginning with verse 20, tells of the biblical god's extreme displeasure with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He notes that their "outrage is so great and their sin so grave" that he will have to take action. But Abraham comes forward and asks, "will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?" So begins the bargaining. Abraham asks if the biblical god will forgive the

cities if fifty righteous people can be found there; and if they can't be found, then what about forty-five? How about forty? Even if only thirty? But then only twenty? Reaching the bottom line of ten, the biblical god assents yet again that there will be no destruction for the sake of the ten. It is a remarkable story in a text whose main plot line and agenda is the ascendance and primacy of the biblical god of Israel for the emerging nation of Israelites as well as over the other gods of the ancient world. It is even more remarkable that a human being is shown to be the hero who prevails over this god to bring a measure of justice to the world or at least tries to. It is a human being who devises the plan to save the innocent; it is he who recognizes the inherent moral bankruptcy of the retribution and punishment to be meted out. Much like the great Wizard of Oz who is revealed to be just a man behind the curtain, the biblical god will only have the power given to him by human beings. The ancient story raises many ethical and moral issues for our lives in our time. What words can we use to effect change where needed? What power do we each have that we can exert for the greater good? Genesis 18 truly is a much better fit for Rosh Hashanah than the Akedah.

As the new year begins, we have the opportunity to reset our behaviors and habits. Our own personal settings of our volume, our voice and our actions need to be adjusted. During the pandemic, we adopted new language necessitated by the far too many Zoom meetings we attended – we muted ourselves so as not to be a

disruption to the meeting. We voluntarily made it so we could not be heard, or acquiesced to others (the “hosts”) doing it for us. That habit has continued as too often we still need to be reminded to “unmute” ourselves, having made the mistake of hitting the mute button yet again. The time has come to permanently unmute ourselves not only in a virtual world but in reality, to make our voices heard individually and as a meaningful cacophony collectively. Abraham spoke on behalf of people he never met and didn’t know; he spoke out because it was the right thing to do. It was the ancient version of “if you see something, say something.”

The first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-State Israel, Rav Kook said, “I don't speak because I have the power to speak; I speak because I don't have the power to remain silent.” What a remarkable statement. It may be the only time that powerlessness serves us well. It is propulsive and targeted. Our words form almost instinctively; the better part of our human nature emerges. It is the part that cannot tolerate the othering of those different from us; that cannot abide bullying that inevitably escalates into oppression; and that cannot allow wrongs to go unrighted. Then, before we know it, full sentences emerge. Others hear us and either echo our words or join in a chorus. Whether a single voice of many words, or many voices expressing a single word, a message of hope or outrage, of optimism or protest, is conveyed. It grows stronger and louder whether on behalf of the fifty, or the forty-five, or the forty, or the thirty, or the twenty, or the ten. Silence is simply not a

viable option when there is much to be said. It is incumbent on us to give voice to the voiceless. When injustice prevails, we are pushed to chart a just course to countervail it. We can knock off the “i” and the “n”; even in the spelling a mere two letters can change everything. On this day of all days, we affirm that we cannot turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the those less fortunate especially when we have the resources to ameliorate their condition. From the biblical example of Abraham, through a modern example of another Abraham, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched arm in arm with Dr. King in Selma to secure the rights of people he didn’t know, we can be inspired to action. And we can start with our words, because as Dr. King said, “there comes a time when silence is betrayal.”

The Hebrew expression for courage is “ometz lev” meaning strength of heart. The English definition of courage is “the ability to do something that frightens one” (Oxford Dictionary), or “the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear of difficulty.” (Merriam Webster) These definitions though stray from its etymological roots retained in the Hebrew phrase. The word is derived from the French word “Coeur” and the Latin word “cor,” each meaning heart. Courage goes beyond bravado or the flexing of muscles; it requires the heart, the source of feelings. It of course needs mental will power, sometimes spontaneous and other times planned. But it first needs that we be moved by the heart. It requires a degree of empathy for the other, not an othering without

empathy. Courage means embracing the stranger, not making another out to be strange. We focus on our shared humanity, even if our paths and choices are different. It is the very thing that allows others into our lives, whether actually or situationally. In yet another paradox of the human condition, a place of vulnerability guides us to a place of strength. Our hearts can lead, and the rest of our bodies follow. Of course there is risk, but the risk of dehumanization is much greater. We cannot allow ourselves to be made lesser, to be made small. From Genesis 18, we can learn that speaking out takes such courage. Standing up takes such courage. Taking a stand takes such courage. For the sake of the fifty, or the forty-five; for the sake of the forty, the thirty, the twenty, the ten. Even for the sake of just one. It takes courage to actualize the Talmudic saying that “if you save one life, it is as if you have saved the universe.” There is so much power in that, a power that goes beyond ego and self-gratification. Acting on behalf of people we have never met brings its own satisfaction. For Heschel, marching with Dr. King led him to say that he felt he “was praying with his feet.” We need not be prayerful people to understand what he meant, nor to realize that we too can be uplifted by centering such strength of heart in our lives. It leads to creative solutions to intractable problems. It directs us to better outcomes for ongoing issues. It helps us repair our broken world making it a better place for not only ourselves, but for our

children and the children of people unknown and unknowable. For each life is a universe, its very own universe, worthy of existence, sustenance and respect.

In Ecclesiastes 3, we are reminded that there is “a time for silence and a time for speaking.” Judicious use of each is required. It is a curious paradox that both silence and sound in excess can be deafening. But the time for silence is never when injustice is being perpetuated. Neither can it be abided when our relationships are at risk. The communal use of our voices may impact hundreds or even thousands of people, as the ripple effect can never be fully known. Such is the power of our voices. Together, we can make what singer-songwriter Neil Diamond called “Beautiful Noise,” “made of joy and strife . . . it’s the music of life.”

However, sound and silence in excess can also be exhausting. We are surrounded by so much that needs tending – so many fifties, and forties, and thirties, and twenties, and tens. It can be overwhelming, even to the point of paralytic inaction. It is therefore important to recognize that moderation is appropriate and entirely proper. The “music of life” need not be played at full volume at all times. We need not, and should not, leave here today, beginning a new year, and try to tackle the entirety and enormity of the world’s problems. That would be ego run unhealthily amuck. But we can promise ourselves to start, perhaps with a whisper that grows into a hum and then becomes more fully enunciated on behalf of a particular cause or issue. If signing a petition suits you,

then sign it. If writing a check to a worthy cause works for you, write it. If attending a rally or parade is your preference, attend it. On this day, pledge to yourself to find a way to emulate the Abraham we find in Genesis 18. When we gather in this space next year, the space may be the same but through your voices, the world will not.