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“Is Anybody Home?”

I.

The Israeli social activist Anat Hoffman is the heroine of the Women of the Wall saga and thus of the struggle for religious pluralism and civil liberties in Israel. That struggle continues to develop, but it is not my primary subject this morning. This summer at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, in an inspiring talk about the Kotel and beyond, Anat shared with us the interesting fact that modern Hebrew has until now lacked words for the following two terms: integrity and accountability.

Integrity is now “yoshrah,” from the root “yashar,” to be “straight” or “honest.” Accountability is less elegant: “acharayutiyut,” from the word “acharayut,” “responsibility.” To be responsible for one’s responsibilities, thus to be “accountable.”

Today I want to talk about what I think it means to be responsible, accountable Jews. Jews not only of integrity, but Jews of *Jewish* integrity, of *yoshrah*. My model will be the anti-hero of today’s Torah reading, and especially of tomorrow’s reading: Avraham Avinu, Abraham our premier patriarch. In so doing, I in no way mean to ignore the storm clouds of war gathering over Syria and Washington. I hope, rather, to give those temporal matters – this year’s version of those temporal matters - a larger perennial context.

In our two readings for Rosh Hashanah, Abraham disappoints us. He accedes to Sarah’s demand to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their home, and then to bring

Isaac for a ritual sacrifice. In neither case does he “speak up” to God or to his family. He is unlike the same patriarch Abraham who earlier in this same parashah, upon learning that the despicable citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah will be wiped out, and supposing that some good persons will suffer as well, confronts God with the following: “ha-shofet kol ha’aretz lo ya’aseh mishpat? Will not the judge of the entire world act justly?”

Perhaps our Rabbis chose these readings to remind us at the new year that we ourselves are deeply flawed, often deeply disappointing to ourselves and others. Otherwise they might have given us the Abraham that they themselves favored, the Abraham who dares to “call out” God and people alike. That version of the patriarch would remind us of our core assignment as Jews: to be accountable to God and humanity for the world *as it truly is*, and to have the integrity to try to change it.

The Abraham the Rabbis love is the Abraham of Lech Lecha. There he is called “ivri,” or “Hebrew.” The midrash gives us three definitions of “ivri.” One is probably etymologically correct: a descendant of Ever. Another comes close: one who comes from “mey-ever la-nahar,” from “across the river.” But the best explanation is purely homiletical: Says Rabbi Yehuda, “kol ha-olam kulo mey-ever achat, v’hu mey-ever achat.” “All the world is on side, and he is on the other.” In other words, he is a stranger. Arthur Green translates it as “contrarian.” And his “contrariness” is precisely what gives him his integrity, his *yoshrach*, and what makes him the model for each and every Jew.

Commenting on the portion Lech Lecha, the Chassidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev interprets God’s command to Abraham, “v’heyeh b’rachah,” “and be a

blessing,” as follows: “v’heyeh” – “and be” – is merely an alternate spelling of God’s mysterious name, “yud-hey-vav-hey.” Yud-Hey represents God alone, God without a partner. Vav-Hey stands for Israel, God’s willing partner in the world, in the person of Abraham. Only with a partner can God have a full “name,” as it were. Thus the command “v’heyeh” (“and be”) is a coded spelling of the full, partnered name of God. Vav-Hey-Yud-Hey/Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey. God is asking Abraham to be a full partner, without which God has no presence in the world, no chance to bring justice, fairness and hope to the universe. Without Abraham, God is, k’viyachol, as it were, powerless.

Why is Abraham chosen? Why such a flawed individual? Says Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, this is why we hear the Torah calling “Avraham, Avraham.” There is an ideal Abraham, connected to his Godly mission, Avraham I. And there is a “lower” Abraham, subsumed by daily tasks and mundane motives, Avraham II. Real heroes, real leaders are both “upper” and “lower,” and both personas need to hear the call to accountability, *acharayutiyut*.

## II.

Now, because we will note the tenth anniversary of our synagogue fire four days from now, I want to visit one of the boldest midrashim in the canon, a midrash having to do with a burning building. This is a midrash that “explains” the Abraham of Lech Lecha, or more specifically, the “reason” God chooses Abraham to wander far from his familiar life and become the contrarian, and thus the quintessential Jew:

Said Rabbi Isaac: Abraham may be compared to a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames, “*birah doleket*.” He

wondered, ‘Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?’

Until the owner of the palace looked out at him and said, ‘I am the owner of the palace.’ Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, ‘Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?’ The Holy One looked out and said, ‘I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the world.’” Following which, the Holy One said ‘Lech Lecha,’ ‘Go forth...v’heyeh b’rachah, and be a blessing.’

Abraham sees the burning building, the “*birah doleket*.” Doesn’t anyone else see it? Of course they do, but no one seems to notice that it might be a problem.

Or, they *all* notice, but assume that this tragic state is the way of the world, and they walk on. What can *I* do?

Or – and this is the most insidious possibility - they *like* it this way. They benefit from the distraction, the chaos, the suffering of others that provides convenient cover. They know full well that the status quo of the world perpetuates innumerable injustices in their back yard, but it works for them, and so they convince themselves that nothing is amiss.

Or that things are amiss, but the alternative might be worse, so they try to stay under the radar.

Abraham, however, stops. He knows something is wrong. He cannot allow himself *not* to get involved. He is Abraham I, idealistic and accountable.

Either he sees what no one else sees, or he sees what *everyone* sees, but he “sees” it differently. Such is his assignment. To see differently.

When our Tradition insists that we, the family of Abraham, were “chosen,” it does not mean that we were *avored*. On the contrary. It means that we were *assigned*.

Whether any other individual, or religion, or faith, or people, or nation, or ethnos, or what-have-you stops before the burning tower and demands an explanation, or not, is not the point. If they stop, if they point out what is wrong, if they try to repair it, wonderful. If they got the idea from us, or on their own, it is immaterial. If we ourselves have forgotten our assignment and these others remind us, so be it. The assignment remains.

To be Jews – to be Yisrael, originally “*yashar-el*”, “accountable to God,” – to be the family of Abraham – is to notice that the palace is burning, and to alert the world, and to call on all people to help put out the fire.

And in the most radical readings of this text, our assignment includes reminding God’s very self that there is a problem. It includes “calling God out” – demanding that God poke the divine face out of the flaming window to show itself; to be part of the solution. In this reading, Abraham’s question “can it be that there is no one who cares for the palace?” really means, “is anybody home? Is anyone accountable?”

The midrash assumes that God not only exists, and is home, but cares, and is thrilled that someone else cares. It also assumes that God cannot put out the fire. For that task, God needs Abraham. God needs us.

III.

There is another reading of our midrash. I found it in Art Green's *Radical Judaism*, where he attributes it to his teacher, Heschel. I emailed him and he directed me to Heschel's *God in Search of Man*. There, Heschel credits "Rashi" with this reading, but when I looked it up, I decided that it was really Heschel.

In this alternate – and profoundly uplifting – reading, the word *doleket* is read not as "burning" but as "full of light." I'll explain. Think of the precautions we must take before lighting Shabbat and Yom Tov candles that fill the home with spiritual light, but which, if untended, could easily set the house ablaze and cause tragic loss of life. There, the blessing is "*l'hadlik ner*," to make "*doleket*," to "kindle," not to "set on fire," but to cause to put forth spiritual light. To utilize fire, a tool from the mundane world, to call to mind the ideal world.

So here. The palace is *doleket*, full of light. Abraham stops in his tracks. This is wondrous. "Does no one else notice?" he asks. "Does no one find this inspiring?"

Wondering whether the phenomenon is a fluke or in fact the true way of the world, he asks if anyone is behind this miracle. "Yes," says the face that pokes itself out of the glowing window. "I am. Thank you for finally noticing."

Thus Abraham's assignment becomes one of calling on all people to wake up and notice the potential in this seemingly awful world. Look, it is full of light; inspired and inspiring; radically good.

"Do not despair," says this Abraham. "You may not readily see justice, fairness, or hope in the world. But because the *idea* of justice exists in this lowly earthly realm, it is therefore conceivable and achievable. Come let us translate this

metaphor of the palace of light into the reality of the world whose constraints and boundaries we all share. Then the One who is now confined to this poetic image will be freed to exist and prevail everywhere in the universe, and not only in an out-of-the-way tower in a musty old Aramaic text.”

#### IV.

Poor Abraham, like great seers after him, sees this epiphany and calls on God’s very self to do justly, and then slips into fragility (Abraham II) and sends out Hagar and Ishmael with a mere canteen of water and a loaf of bread; then sneaks out before dawn without telling Sarah he is off to perform ritual murder on their son.

How can this be the same Abraham? My question is the opposite: How can it *not* be? After everything we know about our heroes and about our own selves, how can we ask that dead-end question again and again?

If there was a *real-live* Abraham, he was flawed. A century and a half ago there was a *real-live* Abraham Lincoln proclaiming emancipation for American slaves, and the recent film reminded us of the disconcerting gap between his idealism and his personal drives and motivations.

A half-century ago last week, the *real-live* Martin Luther King called on our segregated country to dream his dream of a palace of light, as it were, and still we appropriately refuse to let what we know about his shortcomings diminish that dream. This despite our permitting of the winnowing of much of the civil rights he gave his life to achieve.

A half-century ago this fall we mourned the murder of the *real-live* President Kennedy, and our all-too-clear knowledge of his personal behavior doesn't stop us from remembering his Abrahamic call to selfless national service.

All those imaginative and chutzpadik heroes of what became the national revival of the Jewish people in our time, our State of Israel, were flawed. Self-interested. Duplicitous. Neglectful of their families. Yet they led us to create a miraculous example of Jewish values applied to flesh-and-blood society.

And when that flesh-and-blood Israel disappoints us by exploiting its minorities; by using outmoded versions of religion to squelch civil liberties; by herding its Bedouin off their ancestral lands; by lulling itself into thinking that its status quo relationship with its partner population is somehow sustainable rather than suicidal; it should not make us forget the fact that the same Israel created and maintains, against great odds, a vibrant legal system, a scaffolding of social welfare, and a multiplicity of public voices worthy of the Talmud's highest vision. That it can still create words for "integrity" and "accountability" at this late date.

Better than asking, "how can there be two Abrahams?" we would do well to dwell on the assignment this stranger in the world, this contrarian, accepts for himself and for *us*, and never repudiates or relinquishes:

First, if the palace is burning, say so. And do something. And summon the rest of humanity to help. And do not let the status quo blind us to the truth of the conflagration, even if the status quo offers us unimaginable pleasures and advantages.



Second, if the palace is glowing with beautiful light, say so! Sing it out! Show this sad swath of humanity what it is missing. Show them how to see things not as they are at present, but as they could be. And do not fear being seen as “stranger” or as “strange.” Do not fear to be *ivri*, contrarian par excellence.

V.

And in both cases, know that we are not alone. Know that the very self of this protean world – sometimes blazing and sometimes glowing – wants us to be its partner. Wants us to see that we are not separate from the problems or the beauty of the world we are passing through. Wants us to know that we are the palace; we are accountable; we are the ones who speak the divine voice as we poke our heads out of the window, shofar in hand, and dare to say “*hineni*.” Someone is accountable. Someone *is* home.

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