

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774  
Growth and Change

A woman proudly displayed on her mantelpiece a piece of needlework that said, "Prayer changes things."

A few days later the needlepoint disappeared from its place. The woman asked her husband if he had seen it.

"I took it down;" he said, "I didn't like it."

But why? The woman asked. Don't you believe that prayer changes things?

Yes, I honestly do. But it just so happens that I don't like change, so I threw it away.

A lot of people fear change.

Have you ever noticed the highest compliment you can give a person you haven't seen in a long time goes something like, "Wow, you haven't changed a bit." Ordinarily what we mean by, "you haven't changed a bit," is that the friend we haven't seen in some time hasn't noticeably gained weight, or gone gray or bald, or doesn't appear wrinkly. We mean it as a compliment and it is received as such.

But if you think about it a minute "you haven't changed a bit" isn't really much of a compliment, at all, especially if it's true. I mean really, after years, a person is the same?

Everything changes...and change happens all the time.

I know I've changed a lot since my teens, since my mid twenties, and mid thirties, and quite frankly, I want credit for that growth and development. Some of it was painful, and some of it was exhilarating.

Can you imagine approaching the pearly gates and God looks down into the Book of Life and says, "My, you haven't changed a bit."

That can't be good.

A story about Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism:

When he taught homiletics at JTS, the seminary of the Conservative movement, his practice was to explain the portion of the week on a Monday in a sermonic manner. On Wednesday he would ask a senior student to present his version of the same biblical text.

Dr. Kaplan was a very demanding and critical instructor, and the students dreaded the ordeal...

Once a student took down verbatim what Dr. Kaplan said on Monday. When it came to the student's turn to explain the passage on Wednesday, he repeated Kaplan's Monday interpretation, word for word.

At the end of the presentation Dr. Kaplan said "That's a terrible exposition."  
"But Prof. Kaplan, that's exactly what you said on Monday."

Kaplan replied, "Young man, I have grown since then."

This morning, like every Rosh Hashanah morning, we turn to the story of Abraham, prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac, his only son (not exactly true, remember Ishmael), the son that he loves, on an altar. The ancient rabbis use this story to teach a lesson in faith. God tested Abraham and Abraham passed the test in his willingness to commit a most atrocious crime.

The philosopher Kierkegaard wrote a book about the binding of Isaac called, Fear and Trembling, in which he presents a more sophisticated lesson about faith.

Kierkegaard suggested, like the rabbis, that Abraham was unique in his loyalty to God. He became a knight of faith when he determined that it was possible to slaughter his son, Isaac, and at the same time expect a thousand generations of descendants to be born to him through Isaac. He accepted this paradox that anybody else would consider impossible or absurd. The happy-ending of the story seems to justify the fact that Abraham shows no concern for his son's well-being.

Franz Kafka, born 50 years after Kierkegaard died, argued that suggesting that a man who is so extreme in his faith must have other issues going on. Kafka, like other Jewish thinkers in the modern age, wonders about Abraham's emotional health.

Kafka's interest in Abraham's psychological profile suggests that a person's faith is not measured not in a single act. Instead faith develops over time as we learn from mistakes and failures and integrate those lessons into better choices.

All of this is best understood when we examine Abraham's life as described in the Torah and explained further in the Midrash. When we look at Abraham as a whole human being, we begin to see that his greatness is expressed in his personal growth and learning, moreso than in his faith or loyalty.

We begin with his early childhood.

The Midrash teaches that when Abraham was born, a star rose in the east and swallowed four stars in the four corners in the heavens.

The Chaldean emperor, Nimrod, understood the stars to mean that Abraham would be a threat to his power. So he ordered that Abraham be killed and the family compensated with riches.

Abraham's parents, frightened by Nimrod's death threat against their son, hid Abraham in a cave. There he lived alone for the first three years of his life.

Imagine this baby growing into a toddler with no human contact. No attachment to his mother or his father. No play with siblings or cousins.

The Midrash continues. At age three, when Abraham first leaves the cave, he notices the rising sun. He thinks this powerful heavenly body must rule the universe.

Then the moon takes its position as the sun sets. Abraham thinks this lesser body has chased away the sun. It must rule the universe.

In the morning when the sun rises again, Abraham understands that there is something bigger at play causing the sun and the moon to rotate. He recognizes this "big something" as God.

We learn that Abraham, abandoned by his parents, has an instinctive curiosity about how the world works. He recognizes patterns that emerge in nature. Building upon what he has learned, Abraham finds his way in the world. He returns home.

When he becomes a teen-ager, Abraham enters into the family business, selling idols, made of wood and stone. One day he is left alone to mind the kiosk.

A big, strong man comes to purchase a god mighty enough to inspire him. A poor, old woman approaches to buy a god that would give her wisdom.

Abraham finds himself overcome with disgust at people's false hope in idols so easily produced with chisel and sandpaper. His teen angst drives him to destroy all the idols in his father's shop.

When his father returns, Abraham launches a pre-emptive attack.

"Dad, look what happened. The biggest idol was jealous when I offered food to the smaller ones first. It took this stick and broke all the others."

Does anybody besides me have a teen-aged child? Abraham is brilliant in his rebellion. His father will either have to admit the idols have no power or overlook his son's disrespectful behavior.

The behavior is impossible to ignore. The idols don't possess power, but Abraham's father cannot admit it, while his livelihood sits in smashed little bits all over the floor. He has Abraham arrested.

Abandoned a second time, Abraham seems to have no choice but to flee. The emperor, Nimrod, will have him killed. His only chance of survival is to leave and start over somewhere else.

Abraham brings Sarah and a few others with him when he leaves his homeland to establish something new. He doesn't understand where he is going or what it is that he is building. He does recognize that there is more to learn than what he has experienced in life so far and he has outstayed his welcome in the home of his childhood.

Like us, Abraham learns in marriage the lessons he failed to learn about relationship when he was a child.

At first, he doesn't really understand how to relate to his wife, Sarah. He lends her out to local kings, as if she were a possession to be shared.

When she cannot bear children and shares her handmaiden, Hagar, Abraham obliges because that is the custom. But he fails to exercise sensitivity around Sarah's insecurity about herself as a complete woman. He also fails to see the humanity in Hagar and Ishmael, whom he abandons as easily as his parents abandoned him twice before.

Abraham is not unaffected by the trouble he stirs. But he doesn't give up. Through self-circumcision he builds relationship with an ideal, an invisible God, revealed through the deeds of human beings.

And as if self-circumcision was not drastic enough, the big test arrives. What will it take for Abraham to prove that his invisible God is the foundation upon which all life exists? Will he sacrifice his only son, the son he loves, to prove his loyalty.

The rabbis praise Abraham for his willingness to slaughter Isaac.

I think his willingness to sacrifice his own child to prove a point is incredibly self-serving.

I think that it is because Abraham *doesn't do it*, that he emerges a hero.

It's as if at that very moment, the placing of the knife at the throat of his son, Abraham catches his first glimpse of Isaac's humanity. Isaac's right to exist. Isaac's need for a father to teach him the lessons he had to learn on his own through traumatic experiences.

After the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, Abraham cannot repair his relationship with Sarah. News of what he did gets to her before he returns home and she dies from the grief of hearing what happened.

And Isaac, never speaks to him again.

Abraham has totally blown it. He knows it, but he knows it too late.

When we are young we do not know what to do with the Torah's teaching that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. Abraham's life illustrates the lesson. Just as his father abandoned him at birth and again as a teen-ager, Abraham finds himself emotionally detached from his wife, his concubine, his first son, and now, his second son. He is left alone.

Despite the fact that Isaac won't speak to him, Abraham tries to do right. He fulfills his fatherly responsibility by respectfully laying Sarah to rest and finding Isaac a wife. Hopefully Isaac will do better on his own.

Abraham remarries and has more children. He lives his final years quietly and, by all accounts, peacefully.

Abraham was a great patriarch because he transitioned religious practice from idolatry and superstition to the journey of becoming a better person. He made big mistakes. And he learned big lessons.

Abraham's story is our story. We experience abandonment and betrayal. We try to do right and still mess things up. We correct some mistakes while we learn to live with the fact that we cannot fix them all.

Judaism renders the infinity of all existence manageable by pulling out special days like Sabbaths and festivals, and cherishing them. We measure our personal growth and development against the passage of the time in a ritual calendar. We track self-improvement from one year to the next.

A Chasidic rabbi, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who helped people in the Warsaw Ghetto before his death in Treblinka, wrote: *...whoever dedicates his life to spiritual progress will inevitably be confronted by difficulties and impediments. These will not only be external, such as making a livelihood, but also internal blocks: indolence, negative tendencies, destructive character traits, and so forth. Someone who is constantly involved in the inner struggle for self-improvement sometimes wins and sometimes loses. From experience, conclusions can be drawn. When you do this you win, that you lose.*

The important lesson is not to give up. So long as we continue to refine ourselves through practice, honest reflection, and recalibration, we improve ourselves and push the evolution of our species forward.

I believe that exercising this sort of faith, the courage to try again no matter what, is religion with which we can live in the world today.

And so, the shofar, this morning, has called us to attention, to pay attention, to our accomplishments and to our deficits.

Rosh Hashanah insists that we start again, that we reflect and make changes. Last year's mistakes become this year's challenges, that we continue to learn and grow, learn from our trials and grow into improved versions of ourselves. *Ken y'hi ratzon*, may it be God's will, may it be our will. Amen.