

**ROSH HASHANAH**  
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Shortly after he received the Nobel Prize, Isaac Basheves Singer told a story about a Jewish man who had gone to Vilna for his first visit. When he came back, he said to a friend, “the Jews of Vilna are a remarkable people. I saw a Jew who studied all day long, the Talmud. I saw a Jew who all day long was scheming to get rich. I saw a Jew who was always raising the red flag, calling for revolution. I saw a Jew who was running after every woman. I saw a Jew who was an ascetic and avoided women.” The other man said, “I don’t know why you are so astonished. Vilna is a big city, and there are many Jews, of all types.” “No,” said the first man, “it was the same Jew.”

The Jewish people are a multifaceted people but we are only a sub-sect of multifaceted human beings of all types. There are times when we are sweet, understanding, sensitive and caring. There are other times when we are cold, calculating, stern and egotistical. Many times we can portray some or all of those characteristics in a very short period of time. Human beings are very complex organisms. Created by G-d we can be G-d-like, but possessing free will as part of that creation we can also destroy G-d’s beautiful creations on this earth. Which one are we?

The paradigm for a Jewish model is Avraham Avinu, Abraham The Patriarch. Abraham represents, according to Jewish tradition, not only the first Jew but the first monotheist. Abraham is a very complex individual. In his book “Living Covenant” David Hartman suggests that there are really two Abrahams which present themselves in the Biblical story. One of them is surely one that we wish to emulate. It is Abraham of the Sodom story . When G-d decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, it occurs to G-d that He should first state his intentions to Abraham, since this was the man through whom he had promised to bless all the nations of the earth. You will recall that Abraham is confident enough in his role as G-d’s consultant to bargain over the fate of the threatened cities, lecturing G-d on the moral significance of not “slaying the righteous with the wicked.”

Abraham confronts G-d and argues his position most forcibly. He is unwilling to comprehend G-d’s decision to destroy the cities without searching out whether there are righteous individuals who dwell therein. He asks G-d in a remarkable passage of Biblical audacity:

“Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?” G-d acquiesces to Abraham’s demand that if He finds 10 righteous people in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah they will be spared. It is as if G-d is humbled by Abraham’s argument and agrees with this individual of flesh and blood that justice must be tempered with mercy. Abraham who claims that he is but dust and ashes gets the better of G-d in this confrontation. This is the Abraham of principle willing to stake his very reputation on confronting the G-d of justice.

But there is also another picture of Abraham in the stories that we read on Rosh Hashana. In the story of the first day we read of Abraham who adheres to the demands of his wife Sarah to banish Hagar and her son Ishmael as well from their

household. Abraham seems to cower at the request of his wife and listens to the demand that he send them out to the desert.

And then there is the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Abraham is asked to take his beloved son Isaac to the top of a mountain and there be prepared to sacrifice him in the worship of the G-d in whom he has entrusted his life. Without an heir, what meaning could Abraham see in G-d's promises that "I will make of you a great nation" and "to your descendents I will give this land." Nonetheless, Abraham obediently set off for the land of Moriah as instructed, taking Isaac and a bundle of wood.

David Hartman writes that "we are not only amazed at the unintelligible demand of G-d, but dumbfounded when covenantal Abraham, who had so boldly stood before G-d and argued for justice, now submits unquestioningly and is ready to give up everything that has been solemnly promised to him. What can explain this unconditional obedience to Divine authority? Had Abraham forgotten what he himself had understood to be possible in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

Hartman comes to the conclusion that both the Sodom episode and the Akedah are compatible with Abraham's religious consciousness. In other words, it is the very same Abraham. At one moment he is willing to stand up to G-d and at another moment to acquiesce to the demands of this very same G-d. At the top of Mount Moriah when the angel called forth to Abraham to desist from slaughtering his son he says:

"Abraham, Abraham." If you look at the Biblical text you will notice there is a large space between these two words. They are contrasting Abrahams and yet they are the very same Abraham. The paradigm of Jewish tradition, the model whom we are all supposed to emulate, is a complex individual sometimes displaying great strength, courage and inner-fortitude and at other times cowering at the demands of others.

Lest we think this is only true of the Jewish people, I would suggest that is not the case. Humanity in its present form got its start with Noah after the destruction of everything on earth during the flood. Noah according to the text "was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age." The Rabbis are not sure whether this is a true compliment or qualified praise. Rabbi Yohanan sees Noah as righteous only relatively, in contrast to the wicked people around him. In a more respectable age, he would have been no better than average. Resh Lakish, on the other hand, says that anyone who has the moral backbone to be a good person in an immoral society would have been an even better person in a generation that encouraged goodness. Which one is Noah? We're not sure for Noah was both the person who built the ark, listening to G-d's words, saving the earth as we know it and also the person who got drunk and brought upon his family shame and derision.

Like Abraham, Noah was a complex individual, at times walking with G-d and at times straying from G-d. Human beings in general are complex, and non-consistent. They are even sometimes contradictory creations all at the same time.

Perhaps that was part of G-d's plan as exemplified in the creation story in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had but one responsibility, not to eat the fruit of the tree of

knowledge. Did G-d set them up for failure? Did He recognize that they could not withstand this one temptation? Was He testing them to see whether they would abide by this one commandment? It's difficult to know. How different the world would have been if they had simply not eaten of that fruit. We could have still been in the Garden of Eden, we would have been vegetarians, naked as the day we were born, having no cares whatsoever. But frankly that would have been a boring world. The dye was cast from the very moment of creation when we were given free will. With that we showed our true nature and found ourselves struggling to live in this world outside of the Garden of Eden, with birth and death, disappointment and success, work by the sweat of our brow and pain in childbirth. Yet, being created in the image of G-d, we are able to make of this world something a little better than we found it.

There are no easy answers in our world. We would all like a world in which there would be black and white answers, there would be ultimate right and wrong. You would know instinctively what to do. But I'm afraid if we are looking for that type of world we will never find it. We live in the gray our entire lives. There are no absolutes. Judaism does not present itself as a tradition emulating the world of Greek philosophy. There are no absolute truths, there is no absolute justice, there is no absolute morality. Living in the real world means that we have to make difficult decisions each and every day. We don't live in the Garden of Eden and perhaps we were really never meant to. The Zohar, the book of Jewish mysticism, suggests that we can only fulfill our true potential outside of the Garden. In the real world that we inhabit difficult decisions, challenges and struggles are part of our every day life.

Let me give you just a few examples that are familiar to all of us from every day life that don't bring about easy answers. My friend, and a good friend of this congregation, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has written a fascinating book entitled "Ten Commandments of Character". Rabbi Telushkin wrote a column on beliefnet.com to which people would send questions looking for insightful wisdom and responses to their particular personal problems. His book collects a number of those questions with his responses. In reading them we recognize that it is increasingly hard to tread the fine line between right and wrong. Let me give you just three examples of the questions that he was asked. I'm not as concerned with his responses but I guarantee you can relate to the problems.

"Dear Joseph, My son is filling out his college applications and has several essays to write. He isn't the greatest writer and I have been doing some fairly heavy editing on his work. I'm feeling a little guilty, but it is a very competitive world today for kids. I even know parents who shell out a lot of money for experts to work with their teenagers on their essays. If everyone else gets help and my son gets none, I'm afraid he won't get accepted anywhere. Signed Ghost Writer." Sound like a familiar problem for those of you with children preparing to go off to college? Is there a right or wrong answer, probably not. How would you respond?

"Dear Joseph, we were taught to love and respect our parents. It seems odd to make people feel obligated to do this. What happens, as in my case, when I don't feel great love or respect for them? Signed Angry Child." Easy answer, I don't think so. A challenging question and circumstance, absolutely.

Finally, a third one: “Dear Joseph, I have a friend who clearly favors one of her two young sons over the other. When the older child acts badly, she finds a million excuses to justify his behavior. But when the younger one does something the slightest bit wrong she comes down on him like a ton of bricks. I want to say something to her, and yet I’m uncomfortable at the thought of doing so. She is a dear friend, and I don’t want to lose her friendship. Signed Worried and Uncomfortable.” Again, a black and white answer, I don’t really think so. A challenging struggle for the questioner, absolutely.

We live in those gray areas when these types of questions are not far removed from our every day lives. What is the right decision? There are no absolutes. Life is not so simple. We are confronted every day with these types of questions.

I believe that what makes us human is the struggle and the challenge. My favorite Biblical story is the episode where Jacob struggles totally alone with the angel in the midst of the night. That angel represents many things including his better nature and, as an apparition of G-d, his religious tendencies. At the end of that struggle, he seems to be victorious for his name is changed from Jacob, the one who held on to the heel of his brother Esau, to Yisrael, the one who struggled with G-d and prevailed. Yet, the text also tells us that Jacob limps away from that encounter and is scarred for life. That episode where he struggles in the midst of the night becomes the prototype for the people called B’nai Yisrael, the children of Israel, the name that we, his descendents, bear to this day.

Yisrael was also chosen to be the name of the land that is our ancestral homeland. Following our patriarch Yisrael’s example we struggle continuously in that land with ourselves and with others, with our G-dly duties and the challenges of every day life.

This past summer I spent almost six weeks in Israel, attending meetings of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel and studying at the Hartman Institute. Traveling on a mission is a wonderful opportunity and I hope you take advantage of the two missions that Beth El is sponsoring this year. But on a mission you will usually see just the highlights of the land and its inhabitants. But Israel is not a Disneyland. It is not simply a tourist paradise. When one lives there and has to deal with real life, it is very different. On an ongoing basis the State has to deal with security and the quest for peace; the morality of being an occupier and the necessity of protecting its citizens; maintaining itself as a Jewish State and being fair to a minority who are also its citizens; possessing religious meaning to some and seeing itself as a normal state among the family of nations.

Perhaps this was shown to me in its most stark reality on a visit we made to the city of Hebron. Hebron is one of the Holy Cities of our people, the place where Abraham bought a burial plot for his wife Sarah and where our Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried in the cave of Machpelah. For many years there existed in Hebron a small Jewish community. In 1929 in the Arab riots many of those Jewish inhabitants were killed. From 1948 through 1967 Hebron was Judenrein, as it was not part of the State of Israel. Since 1967

through the force of some individuals and government decisions a small community, today numbering some 530 Jews, live in Hebron among 130,000 Arabs. Hebron is a Holy City and many of its inhabitants are religious. And, Hebron is a city filled with tension. In 1994 Baruch Goldstein, on the Eve of Purim, mercilessly killed 29 Arabs in a mosque in the Cave of Machpelah. Most Jews condemned and continue to do so the actions of Baruch Goldstein. But there are some in Hebron who do not see it that way for they are convinced that the Arabs around them are more than prepared to massacre them.

We were taken to Hebron by a group known as Shovrei Shtika, breakers of silence. This is a group of former army personnel, many who served in Hebron, who are critical of the army's activities and especially those of the settlers in Hebron. We walked the streets of the Jewish area. We met with a Palestinian resident and with a leader of the Jewish community there. It is a most complex situation.

There are some who believe that Jews need to inhabit Hebron, for it is one of our Holy Cities. There are others who believe that inhabiting it is merely a provocation and we have no right to be there. Since my trip 17 people have moved back into Hebron's former Arab market which Jews there said had been privately owned Jewish property before 1948. On August 6, Israeli riot police officers forcibly removed them from their houses. Evictions were met with resistance from settlers who pelted the security forces with stones. Police officers were injured as well as some of the settlers and the protesters. Twelve soldiers refused to take part in the evacuation based on the decisions of their rabbinic teachers, who believed that inhabiting the entire State of Israel is a Biblical Commandment.

What is the right decision? It's not so simple. Hebron is part of Jewish memory all the way back to the Abraham and yet it is probably today the most contentious city, outside of Jerusalem, in the Arab Israeli conflict. No, Israel is no Disneyland it is real life with all of its problems, challenges and struggles. There are no easy answers in Hebron or Jerusalem or frankly any place else in Israel. We are in for a long struggle with some great challenges.

Many of us might say that we would love to live in a world with easy answers. But, since we are not going to find it we simply have to make the best of it. I really believe that the world with which we have been presented is really the best of all possible worlds, for I don't want to live in a world with easy answers, with black and white solutions. I want to live in a world where there are continual struggles to be B'nai Yisrael, to be human beings following Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham, complex, conflicted creations of G-d. Frankly, it would be boring to live in the Garden of Eden; I would rather accept the challenges and struggles of living outside of it. In the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Eruvin it states: "For two and a half years, Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel disagreed: One said "It would have been better if humans had not been created." The other said: "It is better that human beings have been created." They voted and concluded: "It would have been better if humans had not been created. But now that humans have been created, they should search their past actions." Others say: "Let them look into their future deeds." We are creatures of infinite possibilities. More

often than not we tend to abuse our abilities. Yet, we have the capability of learning from our past and making a difference in the future. Unlike any other creature created by G-d we possess that gift.

The purpose of the Days of Awe is told I believe in the constant struggle in the gray areas of life. Our major purpose in life is to improve the world and to make it a little better than we found it. Where do we start? Aldous Huxley suggests that “there is only one corner of the universe that you can be certain of improving, and that’s your own self. So you have to begin there, not outside, not on other people. That comes afterward when you have worked on your corner.”

That is what true Teshuva, repentance, is all about - to move towards correct decisions on an every day basis and to better ourselves in the years to come. We are Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden. We are Abraham of Sodom and the Akedah. We are Jacob holding on to the heel of his brother Esau and Yisrael struggling mightily with G-d. We are challenged to make ourselves and our world a little more G-d-like. It is an imperfect world without black and white solutions with a lot of gray areas and it is in that struggle to improve ourselves and our world that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur come to remind us that we can make a difference.

I pray that we may make a change this year and become more G-d-like, better human beings and better Jews. I pray that we may grow in the struggles and the challenges that will face us during the coming year and I pray that we, B'nai Yisrael, may look forward to a year of a little more peace, a little more harmony and a little more justice. In this imperfect world we can do no more yet no less than add our little contribution towards improving it for ourselves and others. May we live up to our task, may we accept the challenge and may we make this imperfect world a better place for ourselves and future generations.

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