

Romemu Dvar Torah November 25 2016

So if you survived Thanksgiving, which is always a mixed bag. Thanksgiving means going sometimes to homes that are full of gratitude and light. Places that remind us of warmth and support.

Good things. Jokes. Camaraderie. Some sibling rivalry. For some people, going home is not the best option on Thanksgiving to feel gratitude. It reminds them of a journey to find light in some difficult or challenging circumstances.

Being able to sift through memories to find nuggets. Challenges that might or might not have been opportunities. I had an opportunity this past week to watch the documentary about Amy Winehouse. And those who haven't seen it, of course, about the incredibly talented and tragic figure Amy Winehouse who died way before her time. And the theme that kept jumping out to me was how often when we imagine challenges and trials and tribulations, we have one particular frame for it. And the power of the movie was to explore a character who had succeeded by any measure. Someone who didn't want fame, but had found her. Someone with incredibly innate gifts for music, for originality, for innovation. She had her demons. But her gifts came with a price. Her gifts were not freely given. There was a lot there in the gifts. There were challenges. There were obstacles. There were impediments.

There was schmutz. And I couldn't help but think about a Torah that I learned from Rabbi J.J. Schachter, a great rabbi, a great friend, who a number of years ago told me that this coming week's parashat tomorrow morning is the parashat, it's the reading and the weekly wisdom of the Torah that gives us the aftermath of the greatest test that Abraham had. The Akedah, the sacrifice of his son Isaac.

Here is Abraham who was blessed with so many gifts. We're introduced to him at the end of chapter 11 as someone who followed his father out of Ur Qasdim. And then at the beginning of chapter 12 he's bidden by God to go somewhere and go to this place that I'll show you, but when you go, I'm going to bless you. You're going to have land and children. And none of those gifts come easy. Am I right? He shows up in the land. Ha, land. This land is my land. Famine in the land. Wait a second, God. This land is... Down to Egypt you go. Children.

Lu yishma'el lefanecha, I have Yishma'el. But I want another. Oh, you can have another. You'll have Isaac. You'll be a little bit old. And then you'll offer him up. At some point Abraham's got to be scratching his head going, OK, what is going on here? And of course, Pirkei Avot, the rabbis, they enumerate ten trials that Abraham had to undergo in order for his gifts to be his gifts. For him to own his gifts. And Rabbi J.J. Schachter said that tomorrow morning in the aftermath of the last final test, the greatest test, would he give up his son we're told about the death of Sarah, his wife.

And Abraham comes to give a eulogy for his wife and to mourn her and then immediately begins eulogy for his wife by a burial plot. Give me an ahuzah, give me a holding of land in the land. And Rabbi J.J. Schachter quoted Rabbeinu Yonah in Pirkei Avot who said, even though it says in Pirkei Avot in the Ethics of the Fathers, there are ten tests.

The Ethics of the Fathers didn't tell you about this one. There's one last one, the eleventh test. And the eleventh test is this.

Even though you were given the land as a gift to Abraham, will you be willing to negotiate for it as well? Will you say, no, it belongs to me. Your culture, your ways, your mores, they're of no interest to me because I'm entitled to this land, you see. I'll take that grave over there. That one looks nice. Or maybe that one. I'm willing to give you my hard-earned money. I know it was a gift. But gifts come with work. Gifts come with challenges. Gifts come with tests. Will you rise to the occasion, says Rabbeinu Yonah of Abraham in tomorrow morning's reading, will you rise, will you negotiate even for the thing that you thought belonged to you? You see here on the dotted line, God said, I'm giving it to you. There is nothing, says our tradition, that comes without hard work.

L'fum tzara agra. If you want something, you have to work for it. Here we have two characters tomorrow morning, Abraham and no less Sarah. In the beginning of the Parshat, we're told, These are the years of Sarah's life, the great nature arc. She was a hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years. The word years is repeated over and over again, which, of course, makes the Rabbis wonder, why are each one of those numbers divided? Why are they separate? She was a hundred and twenty and seven.

She should have said, she was a hundred and twenty-seven. Says Rashi, Rashi famously, All of Sarah's years were equal. They were equal. They were all equally good. And again, we're wondering, Really? Sarah had a good life? Sarah left her family. Sarah watched as the promise that she would be the matriarch was delayed and delayed. Sarah had a good life. Sarah, who in tomorrow morning's reading doesn't even get to say goodbye to her beloved son Isaac, whom she has weaned. Sarah, All of them were equal. They were all equal for good. Says the great Gera Rabbi, Whether you're poor or you're rich, you're going to get it. You're going to have a moment.

The trial of being wealthy The trial of being poor. The trial of winning the election. The trial of losing the election. The trial will appear in so many different forms. And the only question left at the end of the day, says Rabbeinu Yonah, says the Gera Rabbi is, Will you rise up? Will you rise up? Will you be deployed now for the work that needs to be done now? Will you fight for the gifts that we have been given with abundance but still must be clarified and purified?

So much of my heart's attention for the last three weeks has been about meta-narratives, meta-arcs. Whether or not the arc of history will indeed bend, and how can I bend it, and who can bend, and who will bend.

And yesterday morning, on Thanksgiving morning, when we were preparing for Thanksgiving, he said, We're getting ready. There are churches, and there are places to go to feed people. And so we, and this, by the way, I mean, there's no way to avoid this, but it's not the smug Upper West Side that went to do good, okay? Like rolling up our sleeves and showing up, there were 400 people feeding homeless.

Just this past week, on a Friday night, as we prepared to sing our Kabbalah Shabbat, I was in the back, we were all getting ready, and we're usually, all the musicians and the prayer

leaders are usually in the back, and we're just focusing and practicing and preparing. And there were two women from the Southern Methodist, from the Methodist Church on 104th Street, they usually pack up dinners and deliver to the 18 homeless shelters on the Upper West Side.

There are big arcs, there are big things that are happening and all of us should be worried, concerned, and proactive, but there are small things. There are small moments here where the gifts that we have already been given need to be purified and clarified so that we can say, Hakosha v'Litovah, we're making it good for everybody. We're going to try to make it so that the water level will rise up, rise up. So we have work to do.

It's Shabbat, it's the day after Thanksgiving, we counted our blessings, but there's no shortage of... of... of... of... tomorrow and the next day all around us. So let's have a revolution for love. Let's keep thinking about the big issues, but let's not postpone the week to week that we need to do.

For Avram, who was given all the gifts and then told to wait. Who too was given gifts and had her struggles. Each of them forever memorialized on our lips and our hearts as people who were willing and able to overcome obstacles.

We can do it, everyone. Let's rise up.