

VAYERA 10/19/13 – Creating Connection

We are all familiar with the story of Sodom and Gemorah, and we all know how it ends. Those of us who have driven on the *k'vish ha'aravah* - the road along the Dead Sea heading from Jericho down toward Eilat - have seen the strange, tall, salten figure on top of the mountains known as *Eishet Lot*, Lot's wife. Legend has it that that is the exact place where she turned around to watch the destruction of Sodom and Gemorah, and she froze as an ever-lasting reminder of that moment in history.

What always struck me about this story wasn't Abraham bargaining with God, not even the horrific destruction. It was Lot's wife. We don't know anything about her except that she was whisked out of town with Lot and his two daughters (another set of characters!), and on the way out all she did was turn around, and poof!, she turned into a pillar of salt. It just seemed so strange. Why salt? Why anything? Why not just let her live with the memory engraved in her mind's eye forever of the horrific destruction she witnessed?

Perhaps it is just that humans cannot take watching such terrible destruction without freezing in angst and pain and fear for the other. There is not a whole lot of complication in this story. The Torah states it simply, in fact: "...the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah...Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt." That's all we are given.

There are two questions in particular that come to my mind when reading this story each year. First, why did she look back? And second, what's so wrong with having looked back?

We often focus on the earlier parts of this parshah--Abraham being visited by three angels who prophesize Sarah giving birth (and the laughter which followed), or Abraham negotiating with God to save Sodom and Gemorah for the sake of the few good people who may dwell there.

Perhaps most frequently we focus on the famous *Akeidah* story--the binding of Isaac. But let's look more closely that the lesson to be learned from this short scene involving Lot's wife.

A basic function of being human beings with *neshomas*, with souls, we feel so deeply connected to each other when we see someone else exhibiting great emotion, whether joy or pain. This is why something tugs at our hearts when we read a great romance, and something knots in our stomach when we hear of someone in the community - someone we don't even know - suffering terribly. We celebrate each other's joys and mourn each other's losses. We can call it human nature, or we can understand it through the lense of Bereishit where we learn that we are all created in the Godly image, with a Godly spark, so all of us have the great capacity to empathize with the other, to recognize the Godliness in the other and to act in a Godly way.

I want to share a story. On January 17, 1994 a very major earthquake, magnitude 6.7, struck Los Angeles at 4:31AM on a Sunday night. The epicenter was just about 8 miles from our home. I was ten years old, in fourth grade. We went to bed excited the night before because my parents were taking me and my younger brother to see Disney on Ice at the Los Angeles Forum the next day—an annual family outing we so looked forward to.

When the earth stopped shaking, life essentially stopped. Freeways buckled, apartment houses collapsed, dozens died and over 8,700 were injured. The sanctuary of our synagogue was condemned and closed for months after, as the roof had caved in. I froze upon seeing the devastation as we began to go out in the days that followed. It was terrible...it was scary...it was not earthly. I felt like Lot's wife. I was disoriented, in a constant state of disbelief. I kept turning back to look, and I kept freezing. I kept crying. I kept being scared.

We all have moments like this. Hopefully not many. But as time passes and we reflect, we can understand how deep our instinctual connection to each other is. And when we look back,

when we see tragedy or when we have moment vividly recalling those times in our lives, we freeze.

What came out of the experience was the realization that things are just that—things. Once the aftershocks were over and the sun came up, we took a walk around the house. To nobody's surprise, after having heard the rumbling and crashing overnight, we found broken sets of china and family heirlooms strewn about the house, furniture toppled over, structural damage, and of course we knew we were not alone.

My best friend at the time was my rabbi's son. His house completely collapsed. Everything they owned virtually destroyed. His father had just joined our synagogue as a rabbi the previous year. I saw the pile of rubble that just days earlier was the house we studied in, the yard we ran around in. It was awful. It was otherworldly. It was not fair. How could this happen to someone I so loved...someone like me... Again, as I looked at the terrible devastation, I froze. I became Mrs. Lot.

Another very powerful thing came out of the experience. Neighbors got to know neighbors again, families shared basic necessities--working appliances, drinking water, bathrooms, radios, food...and perhaps more important than any of those, stories. We got to hear each other's stories...to know among whom we lived...and we were a much stronger community because of the shared experience that left us with nothing but each other for a few days.

We live in a time now with more ways to communicate and to connect than ever before, and yet we say so little of value and are more disconnected than ever. I, too, am guilty of this. We used be able to share more in a 5 minute call to our grandparents than we do today while talking with friends and family around the world for hours on end. We used to get to know our

neighbors and have block parties and barbecues, and now so often we know nothing about those people who live next door. And it's a shame. While all the great gadgets and helpful "apps" have enhanced many areas of our lives, they have allowed us to forget what really matters. They have shown us that there are alternatives to deep and lasting friendships.

We have a thousand friends on Facebook, hundreds of followers on Twitter, but how many good friends do we have upon whose shoulders we can cry in times of distress? We go to concerts and sporting events and spend so much time capturing the moment on cell phone video in order to post online and be able to say to the world "I was there!" that we cannot be present enough to savor the experience with all our senses. We have trained ourselves to multitask. We accomplish more than ever, yet how much of it is truly worthwhile?

Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* writes that "to touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground." Creating meaningful relationships in life takes allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to recognize and accept our own fragility. It takes great trust in the other, knowing that as long as our faith in each other is strong we are alright.

Jared, you spoke to us about the lesson of the story of the Binding of Isaac. God tested Abraham. God tested Abraham's faith in Him, his character as a father and his very morality. God needed to be reassured that Abraham was all-in, in their relationship. And what did Abraham do? When Isaac came to the realization that they were going to make a sacrifice and had everything but the lamb, Abraham was confident in his relationship with God and knew in that moment that all would end well. He told Isaac that God Himself would provide the sacrificial animal.

So back to Lot's wife. We really don't know much about her. The Torah doesn't even give us her name. Lot's wife represents humanity, and by not giving us any information about her we are given the opportunity to see ourselves in her.

So why did she look back? Any possible reason we can come up with for her looking back and disobeying the angels can be possible. Perhaps it was because she and Lot had amassed great wealth and had a palatial home and she couldn't believe it was all literally going up in smoke. Perhaps, as the Midrash suggests, she wanted to be sure her daughters were following them. Perhaps she was extremely mad at those who had raised a riot outside their home in the previous scene and wanted to be sure they didn't escape God's wrath. The truth is, we don't know. But the Torah and our tradition also teach us to find the best in people--the Godly spark implanted in the first people--the unique connection we feel to each other which leads me to believe that Lot's wife turned around in disbelief and fear. A very real, human reaction to supernatural events.

The Talmud lists in *Masechet Berachot* the places where we are required to recite a blessing upon arrival. Toward the end of the list the rabbis at Lot's wife. So the question now is: why do the rabbis instruct us to say a blessing at this place? Why pause to remember this place where God yet again took it upon Himself to destroy a piece of humanity? I would pose it is the connection she felt to her fellow citizens—even the ones who caused the riot outside her home—that caused her to turn around; for she is a mother and she knows the fragility and value of life. And in that moment the world became so confusing that she froze in the salt of her own tears.

It is a remarkable thing when you think about it, the human connection. Our tradition is one that values relationships so much that it includes volumes of laws about how to speak to one another, how to show honor to guests, how to care for someone less fortunate than us, and even how to make *teshuvah* with our neighbors--how to repair broken relationships--because the Jewish tradition knows the importance, the significance, the vitality of connection to others in living full and complete lives.

We are taught to value what is truly important...to search hard and seek those opportunities and places in life where real meaning is to be found. We are taught to savor experiences and to spend our time focused on those things that bring positivity to our lives and to the world. The opportunity to find deep and meaningful relationships is something not terribly common, especially in an age where we find ourselves with so many things to accomplish that we are left with little time to savor life's pleasures.

I want to speak to our B'nai Mitzvah for a moment. Todd and Jared, come join me at the amud. The Torah teaches us in Bereishit "*Lo tov heyot adam levado*"--that is is not good for us to be alone. I assure you social networking, texting, tweeting, email, iPhones and Blackberries is not what the Torah had in mind. It refers to real connection with real people. It means working to build and sustain community, and that is exactly the sort of holy business we engage in daily, in this very building—which you have been a part of these past years, and which we hope you will continue to take part in as you grow.

And this is my prayer for you...for all of us. I pray that we be blessed with many deep and holy and fulfilling relationships in your lives. I pray that we know deep connection with our selves, with God and with each other. I pray that we should know the value of community. For you see, we are a people who never needed FaceBook or Instagram to be connected. All we need to do is walk into a shul and we can be assured that we will be welcomed, that we are among friends. I was going to suggest to you that you can be sure you can knock on any home with a mezuzah should you find yourself somewhere unfamiliar, but I suppose let's just leave it at "if you find yourself in a strange place with two homes, and one has a mezuzah...(knock on that door...)" You get the point... The world is a scary place, and things happen beyond our control. The lesson we learn from Mrs. Lot is that it's OK to be human. In fact, it may even be a really good thing.

That pillar of salt has been up on top of *Har S'dom* for thousands of years, and all the desert sand and all the wind and all the sea air has not destroyed it. She still stands there as an eternal

reminder not just of the place where God destroyed two cities, but as a reminder of the deepest level of human connection we can achieve. That subconscious connection which forces us to look when we know something terrible is happening to another person. I hope next time you are in Israel you will travel from Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea, and even further south, and look up to see the *Eishet Lot* on top of the mountain. I hope you will see it and be reminded of this day, and I hope you will be proud.

As I hope you know, B'nai Torah is your home. We join with your families in kvelling at your accomplishments today and always. You are our kids, and we look forward to watching you continue on your journey to Jewish adulthood. On a personal note, it has been a pleasure teaching you and watching you grow these past few months. You have both brought me great joy, and I will cherish the time we have spent together. I am very proud of you both.

I will now ask the congregation to rise as I recite the threefold blessing--the Priestly Benediction--with which Aaron blessed his children, and with which we bless our children each week at the Shabbat table.

PRIESTLY BLESSING

We wish you much success in the years ahead and we look forward to many years of deep connection and to watching you as you continue to grow in the fine young men you are. Mazel tov!!