

Amina's Bat Mitzvah speech

The Torah portion for this week is from Bereshit (called Genesis in English). I don't think you could have a more fitting portion for any bar or bat mitzvah. Bereshit is all about beginnings: the beginning of the world, the beginning of life, the beginning of our concept of G-d and our relationship to G-d. It is in this book of the Torah that G-d calls Abraham and first established this new kind of covenant.

Abraham enters the picture well into Bereshit, and he is 75 when G-d first speaks to him; he is 90 as this portion opens. We're just in our 40's and 50's, but we see Abraham and Sarah as the world's best poster children for the notion that "it's never too late to become what you might have been."

Before today's portion, G-d has already called Abraham to "to forth (lekh lekha) from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." He is to leave what is familiar (comfortable?) to him and he will learn a new way, play a new role in the world and because of it he will be blessed (and so will the world).

I mention this by way of background because like Abraham before arriving at this point in our lives, we had also left the ways of our parents and families, the ways familiar to us. We each decided to set out on a new path. Before Abraham began his journey, his father Terakh had himself packed up the family and set out for Canaan. Terakh never made it, but he began the journey. He took the family to Haran, which means "crossroads," and that's where G-d first spoke to Abraham. Although we are moving beyond our familial starting points, we are here today because our parents and/or grandparents began journeys of their own.

The portion is Vayeira, "and G-d appeared" named by the first words in the chapter. It has many of the stories and characters familiar to us: Sarah and Hagar, the birth of Ishmael, Abraham and Sarah's sojourn in the kingdom of Abimelech, the binding of Isaac and the story that most captures my attention Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It should be noted here that the Jewish take on Sodom and Gomorrah is somewhat different from the traditional Christian view. In Jewish tradition the primary sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is the social immorality more than the sexual. Ezekiel says about Sodom "she had plenty of bread, yet she did not aid the poor and needy." The Rabbis describe the Sodomites as mean, uncharitable, unjust, and particularly inhospitable to the stranger. (Sound familiar?)

The two central human characters in the story are Abraham and Lot. Torah tells us that Abraham and Lot are descendents of Noah. You remember him. He's the central figure in the other story of mass destruction in this book. G-d destroys the world, and Noah the one "blameless" man in his generation, is saved from the flood because of his righteousness. But some Rabbinic scholars have always questioned how righteous he could have been not to have attempted to save anyone else (outside of his family), to have accepted such a harsh decree without protest. How righteous could he have been to have watched in silence the destruction of a whole generation from the deck of the ark.

In this regard Abraham represents a real change. When he learns that G-d is contemplating the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he challenges G-d on the justness of that decree. What if there are innocent people there living along side the guilty. Should they be destroyed too? What if there are only 50? What if the 50 righteous

should lack 5, would the G-d of justice destroy the whole city for the lack of 5. Once G-d agrees that the City would not be destroyed if 45 righteous were found there, Abraham begins to work his way down making the case for 40, 30, 20 and finally 10. And G-d agrees, saying, "I will not destroy for the sake of the 10."

When that conversation/argument ends, Abraham must have felt he has scored a real coup – getting G-d down to that 10. Surely that was do-able. Why would he feel so hopeful? Because his nephew Lot had been in the city of Sodom for several years, long enough to take a wife, raise a family and marry-off two of his daughters, maybe 12, 15 years.

And just looking at Lot's family alone the numbers looked promising: Lot (that's 1) has a wife (2), midrash says he had five daughters (that's 7), and two the daughters are married - that gets us to 9. They were just one short of that magic number – 10.

And to raise hopes further, Lot had been mentored by Abraham, schooled, as it were, in the new covenant. When Abraham and Sarah and Lot first left the city of Haran, Torah says they took with them all the "souls they had made," that is, all the people whom they had influenced, taught. G-d had said of Abraham that he would instruct his children in doing justice and righteousness. And remember the primary sin of Sodom was its failure to do what was just and right. And sitting right there in the middle of Sodom was Abraham's nephew and former mentee, Lot.

The people of Sodom could have been saved if Lot had acted. I'm not saying Lot could have turned Sodom into Amishville, but it could have been saved from it from destruction.

I thought of this several weeks ago while sitting with my mother in law, Addy Gordon, listening to her describe her conversations and interactions with a neighbor who holds some decidedly conservative political views. Addy is a walker, and each day she makes her way through a two or three mile trek around the neighborhood. She stops along the way to chat with a friend here or take the paper for a vacationing neighbor there. She's also a democrat and a real party activist. One of the people she stops to chat with is the father in this Pakistani family. She has spent a great deal of time talking with him about public education, assistance for the poor, the rights of workers and, of course, where the democrats stand on all these issues. He recently announced to her that he had changed his political party registration; he had left the republican party to become a democrat. Next, she announced, I'm working on his views on same sex couples adopting children. I thought to myself, if Addy had lived in Sodom it would have been saved.

What could Lot have done in say the 10 or 15 years he was in Sodom? What could you or I have done? How many people could you influence.

It may be easier to argue with G-d. As we often take pride in doing. But what do we do in our individual lives to influence and educate others around the issues on this list we have, the mitzvot, that tells us how we make the world a more just and righteous place.

We are each descendants of Noah and Abraham. And some would say we are sitting in the middle of a country with growing disregard for the poor, hatred of the stranger, and an unconscionable neglect of our children despite our wealth.

We are faced with the same decision as Lot, what do we when faced with such an absence of righteousness and justice. Often we say the answer is coming together with like minded people. But most of us spend a great deal of time talking to people who already agree with us. That's part of it, but clearly that has not been enough to change the world. We have to begin talking with people who don't agree with us.

First, it takes some values sorting, knowing your piece of Torah - The environment, the needs of poor children, the rights of the worker. Pick any item from the mitzvot. It's the "to do" list of the Jewish people.

Second, it takes some chutzpah. Part of Lot's failure may have been excess humility. A righteous man must believe in the power of his own righteousness.

And finally, it takes a willingness to reach outside of our selves, to really connect with people. Now, I'm not a people person. Doing this one would be the biggest challenge for me.

The easier part of this is recognizing that unlike Lot we're not alone and we don't have to do it alone. And we don't have to complete the work, but we certainly have to start it.
