

Drash for Rosh Ha'Shanah Bet - 5782

First, thanks to my mom, Bernette Jaffe, for her editing help. I hope she could connect from Cleveland on the video link. Mom – you always thought I'd run away and end up performing in a circus tent somewhere. Well...Hineni – here I am!

I'd also like to give a shout-out to the Bet Am Zoom Morning Minyan – the “open mike night” of drash giving. Your *inspiring and insightful* words have lifted me through the last eighteen months, for which I thank you!

A *prophet* is commanded by God to go on a mission to fulfill *God's will*. The prophet *awakens in the morning* and sets out on his *donkey* toward the mountains to *build an altar to prepare a sacrifice* and await God's instruction. Despite some *unexpected plot twists along the way*, at the end of the story God's *blessing* comes forth.

A *synopsis* of today's Torah reading?
Perhaps - but ***not that*** *exclusively*.

I think this is an example of how the Torah narrative *echoes and rhymes*, with *stories and language* that repeat in different forms. *Abraham's journey* to Har Ha'Moriah *echos later in the Torah* in *Bilam's journey* to the peak of Har Peor. *God's promise to Abraham* is fulfilled later with *Bilam's blessing of Abraham's descendants*. While the Akeida's *tight prose and gravity* give way to *Bilam's flourishing poetry and heavy irony*, laced throughout both stories is the language of ***vision and perspective***. What these stories *share* puts their *differences in contrast* and provides the *key to their message*.

As we heard in today's reading, *God will reward Abraham's obedience*: “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this *and have not withheld your son*, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the *stars of heaven* and the *sands of the seashore*; and your descendants shall *seize the gates of their foes*.”

In apparent *fulfillment of this blessing*, by the end of the Torah's narrative of wandering as parashat Balak begins, *Abraham's descendants are a nation unto themselves* and have encamped by the Jordan River on the plains of Moab across from Jericho; they are *organized for conquest* and have begun defeating their foes en route to the promised land. Just like Pharaoh before him, Balak, the king of Moab has a problem. The text says: "Moab was alarmed *because that people* was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites, and Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will *lick clean* all that is about us as an *ox licks up the grass of the field*."

So what is a Moabite king to do? Outsource! Balak sends for Bilam, a renowned prophet from the Euphrates, to come to Moab and *put a curse* on the Israelites. In *the Akeida*, the text says: "God put Abraham to the test." But when Balak's messengers come to Bilam, it is *Bilam* who puts *God* to the test. God asks him rhetorically, "What do these people want of you?" When Bilam explains, God tells him **not** to go back with them. But more messengers come and offer a rich commission. Though Bilam tells them he cannot disobey God's command, he *never-the-less* tries asking God once again. This time, God tells Bilam to go with Balak's messengers but to *await further instructions*.

Like Bilam, Abraham *also* gets an open-ended command: God says: offer Isaac "on one of the heights that I will point out to you." But Bilam's mission is *starkly different* from Abraham's – the former a commission with travel perks, the latter *a horrific act of filicide* with the child-victim old enough to ***understand and ask questions***. And yet the text says: "**Va'yashcame** Avraham ba'boker" – Abraham **rose early** the next morning and saddled his ass, wasting no time to fulfil the command. *And Bilam?* "**Va'yakam** Bilam ba'boker" – when Bilam got up in the morning, he saddled his ass.

The difference is telling: Bilam, the professional seer, sees God through a *transactional lens*, and *what will come with God's further instructions* represent limitations; Abraham, the patriarchal visionary, *sees through the lens of faith in God's righteousness* and God's love for him *and promise of covenant through Isaac and following generations*. To Abraham, what will come with God's further instructions represent possibility and hope within the context of that love, *despite* the awful command.

With all good stories, *the journey* is as important as *the destination*, and Bilam is no exception. This is where *the irony* is injected.

Bilam sets out on his ass, two servants in tow. But God is **not pleased** with his going and sends an angel to block his path. The *renowned prophet and seer* cannot see what is *directly in front of him*: an angel with sword drawn. The donkey sees and swerves to avoid it, but Bilam whips her back onto the path. Finally, “bim’kom tsar”- in a narrow place between two walls - where the ass can only move forward, and with the angel positioned directly before her, she simply sits down. This prompts Bilam to beat her furiously, still oblivious to what is right in front of him.

Though attuned enough to converse with God, Bilam can’t comprehend God’s intent. When God puts him in the narrow place, *the seer is blind* to what *even his donkey* sees immediately. The text mocks him relentlessly - *Bilam throws a fit while the donkey speaks back calmly and logically.* When Bilam complains *to the donkey* that it **mocks** him by refusing to move, the donkey **mocks** him by **talking back** “I am the ass you have been riding all along. Have I been in the habit of doing thus to you?” – so as to say: *Are you too thick* to understand the *extraordinary things going on here?* Bilam’s insight only comes after God finally “uncover[s] [Bilam’s] eyes” and he sees the sword-wielding angel ahead. The angel allows Bilam on his way but reinforces the message *to say nothing but what he is told to say.*

Abraham sets out on his ass, two servants and Isaac in tow. The text tells us: “He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship, and we will return to you.” Here is *the critical divergence of these parallel stories*: **Abraham looked up** - “Va’yisah Avraham et eiynav” – literally: “Abraham lifted his eyes”.

The verb used for Abraham’s action - “va’yisah” - resonates theologically because it is what we ask of God in the familiar Birkat Cohanim – the priestly blessing: “Yisah Adonai panav eilecha” – May God lift his face to you and grant you peace. Parsing the words of Abraham’s journey, twelfth century commentator David Kimchi, known as Radak, also sees *the significance of this action emphasized in the grammar.* The Torah, he says, could have been written in *the simple past tense*:

“on the third day Abraham raised his eyes.”

Instead, the grammatical tense connects the descriptor “the third day” to the previous verse, as if it had been written:

וילך אל המקום ביום השלישי

“he went...to the place on the third day,” *separating the descriptor from the act of Abraham raising his eyes.* This serves to emphasize *each of Abraham’s actions as distinct: first he travelled to ארץ המוריה* [following God’s command], and second he raised his eyes, trusting that God would show him which mountain God had chosen for the altar on which to sacrifice Isaac.

And how did Abraham know *which mountain?* Says Radak: “According to [various] Midrashim, the words וירא את המקום מרחוק

(“and he saw the place from afar”) refer to Abraham *actually seeing* the mountain in question. He identified it as *he saw a column of fire on that* mountain. He asked his son if he saw anything specific on any of the mountains, to which Isaac replied that *he saw a column of fire* on one of the mountains. When Abraham repeated the same question to [his two servants], Ishmael and Eliezer..., *they both answered [no].* And here, perhaps, Radak throws in a dig at Bilam: he says “Upon hearing that *both of these men* did not notice *anything out of the ordinary*, [Abraham] told them to remain near the donkey which could also not see anything unusual. - שבו לכם עם החמור - those who are like donkeys [should remain with the donkey].”

Unlike Bilam, Abraham’s faith that God will guide him in righteousness and within the context of His covenant through Isaac not only allows Abraham to **set out** on this journey, but it prepares him to raise his own eyes, effectively to raise his own consciousness. *He primes himself to look for the possibilities he believes God will place in front of him and to act.* How else could a *father* respond to *his son’s* question “where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” by saying *without a trembling voice:* “Elohim yir’eh lo” – God will see to it?

Released on his way, *Bilam* eventually meets up with his patron Balak seeking to curse the Israelites, and with much fanfare and slaughtering of many bulls and rams on many altars, *Balak twice shows Bilam portions of the Israelites* from the mountaintops.

Each time, Bilam *consults* God - as instructed - and each time, he rhapsodizes in full verse about *only being able to speak the words* God puts in his mouth.

Frustrated, Balak attempts *one last* vantage point, atop Mount Peor, from where Bilam can at last see the entire Israelite people camped together below him. Finally, with **full view of Abraham's descendants**, Bilam comes to knowledge. The text, punning on the theme of vision, says: "Va'yar Bilam ki tov b'eyney Adonai l'varech et Yisrael – Now Bilam saw that it was pleasing in God's eyes to bless Israel." Our *seer who can't see* has *finally* seen. At this late moment, **he at last** does what **Abraham** has done as soon as **he arrives** in Eretz Ha'Moriah: Va'yisah Bilam et eynav, va'yar et Yisrael – and Bilam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel." *Only then, when he raises his own eyes* and elevates his own consciousness, does the spirit of God come upon Bilam. Only then does he fully see and speak *in his own words* without needing them to be placed in his mouth. Only seeing *the entire Israelite encampment* can Bilam see the "Mishkan" – the tabernacle - in their midst *and comprehend God's indwelling among them*. He speaks the words we have brought into our daily liturgy: "Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkinotecha Yisrael – how fair are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places – your "mishkanot", Israel".

Bilam's bloviating in verse is in stark contrast to Abraham, who *hardly speaks* throughout the Akeidah story and *doesn't speak to Isaac again in the Torah* after they initially leave the servants. With *Isaac bound on the altar* and Abraham's knife-wielding hand *poised to strike*, God calls out to him through an angel, with urgency – "Abraham, Abraham". Abraham offers the same terse response to God as *when God set this test in motion* –

"Hineni" – I am here.

As if to say: *I stand before You now, ready with my faith in Your righteousness*, as I did when we set out *three long days ago*, and as I did *when You and I negotiated* over Sodom and Gomorrah and I asked You rhetorically: "Ha'shofet kol ha'aretz lo aseh mishpat? – Will the judge of all the earth not do justly?"

It is *the test of this faith, not* the test of **his obedience** in fulfilling the *horrific command to sacrifice Isaac*, that galvanizes Abraham's covenant with God. But *this faith is embodied in action*, for immediately after the angel calls to him, we are told once again: "Va'yisah Avraham et eynav va'yar" - and Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the ram caught by its horns.

Once again, Abraham has prepared himself with faith enough to look for God's possibilities placed before him – and to act.

It may be difficult for us here today to relate to this level of faith in God. The rabbis placed the Akeidah on the second day of Rosh HaShanah *in order to invoke the merit of Abraham for our benefit* as we traverse the ten days of repentance to Yom Kippur. This year, *I think it is **something more***. Like Bilam, *we are hampered by our limited, subjective view of the world*. We have spent the last eighteen months with an *even more limited view*, reinforced by social distancing and the need to keep the pandemic at bay.

What is clear is that the world sits bound like Isaac upon the altar - with a knife poised over him - waiting for Abraham to lift up his eyes to another possibility. There are so many issues - climate, food and housing insecurity, equal justice, access to life-saving care and vaccines, and others - the consequences of which are laid before us. We did not *create* these problems, and we may not *solve* them.

This might not be a moment of great optimism, but it should be a moment of great hope. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l said: "These two concepts, often confused, are in fact *utterly different*. *Optimism* is the belief that things *will get better*. *Hope* is the belief that, *together, we can make things better*. Optimism is a *passive virtue*, hope an *active one*... It needs *no courage* to be an *optimist*, but it takes a **great deal of courage** to *hope*... *Faith* means seeing the world exactly as it is and yet not giving up the belief that it could be otherwise - if we are ready to act with others to make it so. *Faith is realism that has been touched by hope*. And hope has the power to transform the world."

As the shofar blast awakens us to the challenges of the year ahead, *will we keep our eyes down and avoid them?* Will we be like Bilam and *only lift up our eyes* to see others *in their entirety* - *including the divine within them* – once we have tried *all other means* of avoidance? Or will we be like Abraham, *preparing ourselves to act on an abiding faith* and *hope that we can* at least leave a *better world* for our children - if only we have the courage to lift up our eyes to see the world as it is *and work together* to improve it?

L'Shanah tovah tikatevu – May we all be written in the Book of Life for a year of health and hope and one where we lift up our eyes to **each other** and to the **rest of the world**.