

The Goldberg's, Abraham and You

Chag sameach. We heard beautiful and moving talks yesterday from Madeline, Debbie and the Rabbi. So, remember, if this does not go well, three out of four isn't bad

Despite the temptation, I have decided to make this d'var Torah apolitical. I promise not to say that it will be "huge." Or "better than Rashi." Or that "by the way Rashi was overrated."

I just hope I come across as prepared. Which reminds me of a story regarding a Mr. Goldberg who went into a deli and asked how the chicken was prepared. Oh, you heard it.

But, I do want to mention one thing about the campaign—and there is a reason for this. Time Magazine has created an app for one of the presidential candidates. On this app, you can put in a proper name. The app will then create a quote using an insult actually uttered by the candidate.

For example, I put in "Moses" and the app generated the phrase: "Moses, what a loser." I also put in the name "Miriam." I won't tell you what the app said. But I am pretty confident Miriam was not overweight.

The reason I started with this is that--despite the apparent popularity of insults to half the country--the purpose of this d'var Torah is to compliment you and to say how proud I am to be part of this community.

I am not sure if what I am about to say is exactly the same as what Jonathan said yesterday. Or, exactly the opposite.

Depending on what you thought of Jonathan's sermon, you are likely to find this d'var Torah, in a word, "good." On in two words— "not good."

I want to begin by making a couple of observations. The first is that I admire each and every one of you solely because you are here this morning. You could be anywhere else today. You could have gone to IHOP for bacon and eggs. But you didn't. You voluntarily chose to be at services—on the second day of Rosh Hashanah no less. And even though I understand that Sally is a great draw, there is something very beautiful in your presence here. If we were at a reconstructionist synagogue I would ask you to give the person next to you a big hug. But we aren't—so a knowing nod would be appropriate.

The second observation is that I see in you a little of Abraham in the binding of Isaac. And I find something very admirable in that as well.

The goal of this d'var Torah is to try to substantiate those observations and to demonstrate the connection between the two.

Jonathan has justifiably only given me a limited amount of time. But, if you want to talk to me about anything after the service---well, I will be surprised. It will be 1:30 and we have yesterday's leftover cheesecake to get to.

Before I address the binding of Isaac, I want to discuss an older couple I know—I will call them, of course, the Goldberg's--although their real name is Cohen.

The Goldberg's illustrate for me one of the most remarkable aspects of life. My guess is that you know a few similar couples and you feel the same way about them as I do about the Goldberg's. And, my first observation about you, and your presence here today, relates, in a way, to my feelings about such couples.

I am, unfortunately, a man of a certain age. I have also been told that I am a boy of a certain age—somewhere between 4 and 7--but that is a wholly different issue. But, as I have gotten older, I have had the opportunity to see up close couples like the Goldberg's. They have been together for decades and I have known them throughout their marriage.

I have seen them deal with the “waxy build up” that comes from life and from being in a committed relationship. I have seen them deal with problems caused by events beyond their control and with self-inflicted wounds. Over the years the Goldberg's often seemed to me much more like the Costanzia's from Seinfeld and Ralph and Alice Kramden than the Brady's and Rob and Laura Petrie.

At times, not always, if you would have asked me about their relationship, I would have told you that their marriage was more likely to end in divorce or murder than any other alternative. And, at times, again not always, I would have told you that the fact they stayed together was irrational.

But, and this is what is so remarkable to me, is that is not at all how they see their life together now or even how they saw their relationship over the years.

You have likely seen older couples like the Goldberg's sitting around the kitchen table dividing up pills as if they were scrabble pieces. And while in the past they may have been arguing over their children or finances, you now hear them bickering with exactly the same amount of vigor about who forgot to close the refrigerator door or who misplaced the remote control. But, if you asked them how they stayed together over the years, or why they stayed together, they would not dwell on the imperfections in their relationship- and may not even mention them. Instead they would talk about their love for each other.

They would not talk about the burdens of their marriage or the irrationality of their staying together but the joy they have gotten out of their commitment to each other and their relationship, the family they built, their desire to continue the life story they began when they met, and an ineffable bond—some dark matter—which has held them together.

I can't help but sense the beauty in such a relationship and my guess is that many of you feel the same way. And the fact that they care so deeply about each other despite the baggage they picked up during their life together makes their relationship even more inspiring.

One lovely story about this type relationship concerns a man walking across a street and a driving squirrel--wait that's the wrong story although it has a similar point.

This story involves an older man who was clearly nearing the end of his life. He was at home in bed and he smells downstairs his favorite foods. He gathered what little strength he had and made his way down the steps and he sees on the dining room table every food he loved. And he thought to himself how much his wife loved him and how lucky he had been in his life. And, as he got ready to take a bite of his favorite cake, his wife comes out of the kitchen and she looks at him and lovingly says "stop, that's for the Shiva." But even there you sense the love between them even though it might not be as easy as it looks.

I will get back to the Goldberg's in a minute. So, please don't do what I would be tempted to do at this point and take a nap. If you do, then the first part of this d'var Torah won't make sense.

Now let me turn to Akedah. I imagine most of you feel that Abraham was wrong in being willing to sacrifice Isaac. You are repulsed by the thought of child sacrifice. And you likely

recognize the dangers in such fanatical faith. And if you feel that way, you are not alone. Not only our sages and post-Holocaust scholars but one of the greatest western philosophers, Immanuel Kant, sets forth numerous reasons why Abraham's risk of Isaac's life was immoral

I won't go through Kant's various arguments because they are probably the same as yours. But I do want to mention one of his most interesting points. He concedes that maybe it is possible for a human to hear directly from God. But, in Kant's view, if the voice that one hears is telling them do something immoral-like killing one's own child—then the voice is one of delusion and not the voice of God.

Now, before you pat yourself on your back for being in agreement with such a brilliant mind as Kant's, I want to quote another great scholar who said: "don't put Descartes before the horse." [I would say I was sorry for saying that but then Sharon Spiegel would come up to me after services and ask me if were truly sorry. And then what would I say?]

In contrast to Kant, there is another famous philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, who praises Abraham for having such trust in God that he was willing to engage in an irrational act of faith.

Kierkegaard noted that nothing could be more horrible for a parent than losing a child and how much more painful that loss would be if the father was the cause of the death. Yet, Abraham was willing to risk causing and enduring that pain. Abraham's rationale, of course, was based on his covenant with God, a covenant in which God promised to make Abraham's offspring with Sarah a great nation. But, as Kierkegaard points out, given Abraham and Sarah's age, God could not have fulfilled his part of the covenant if Isaac had in fact been sacrificed. Therefore, Abraham was willing to risk undertaking an act that would have

caused him to live with the loss of his son, by his own hands, knowing that, by undertaking that very act, God could not fulfill his part of the covenant.

Kierkegaard, a devout catholic, praises Abraham because of his willingness to engage in such conduct. But, I imagine, most of you disagree with him. You are likely saying that you squarely are in the Kant camp. But, here is why I think you are a little like Abraham. And also why I think your presence here today is so admirable and why I think Kierkegaard might agree.

As Jews, we live in the greatest county in the world at the greatest time in history. But, next week we will remember our brethren who have been martyred because of their faith over two thousand years. And, you know, and I know, that antisemitism remains rampant throughout the world. You recognize that, if we were in most places outside North America or Israel, and we were at these very services, we would need armed guards in front of the building. And we are not ignorant of the fact that there was a time in Spain and in Germany where Jews felt as safe as we might feel today. [If you doubt any of this, then I suggest you talk to Michael Lieberman].

But, despite the risk of being Jewish, you are here this morning. You have openly identified as Jewish. More remarkably, you have raised your children to be Jewish despite the risk that they may very well come to harm someday because of their faith. And, even more remarkable still, you have likely encouraged your children to commit to raise your grandchildren as Jewish despite knowing of the risk. You didn't have to do any of that.

You could have become a Christian by walking into any church 365 days a year and asking to be baptized. You could have raised your children with any other religion or no religion at all. And you

certainly could have said nothing to your children about your grandchildren. But you didn't.

So, couldn't a third party who concluded that Abraham's faith was irrational say the same about you? Couldn't he fairly say that you have irrationally put yourself and your family at risk for a God that no one truly knows exists. And a for a Torah that many of you believe was not given to Moses at Mount Sinai but written by various authors over hundreds of years. And, don't get me started on what this hypothetical third party might say about the irrationality of you giving up cheeseburgers, crab cakes and bacon. Or, that it is okay to eat those things at the beach but not in Bethesda. [I had a great joke about a priest and rabbi that I was going to say here but I decided that it was inappropriate. But, Ken will gladly tell you if you meet him in the back.]

But, of course, you don't see your commitment to the Jewish people and your presence here today as an irrational risk or you would not be here. You would be at work or out volunteering for Hillary. But you would not be here on Darnestown road on a Tuesday morning in October. But you are here.

You are here because you want to be here. You are here because of your commitment to the religion, the Jewish people and our history. And you are here because, I believe you have found what Jonathan suggested yesterday was missing for so many young Jews.

I believe God was not only testing Abraham on Mount Moriah but Abraham's descendants down to you. God was looking to make his covenant with a people who would remain committed to the relationship no matter how irrational it may appear to an outsider; a people who would feel an ineffable bond to Judaism and the Torah. And, as I look out at you today, I see a

community who has passed that test. And I see in you the same praiseworthiness that Kierkegaard saw in Abraham.

And, I also see in your presence here today a relationship similar to that of the Goldberg's. Despite the baggage we have picked up over thousands years, you are committed to Judaism and feel an indefinable bond to the Jewish people. And while you remember the painful events in our history, you don't let those memories destroy your relationship with God. Instead, you have chosen to emphasize in your life the joy of the Torah, our ethics and our traditions. In terms of Jonathan's sermon yesterday, you have found what others have found missing.

Yes, like Job (and like the Goldberg's) you might argue with God. But you have chosen to continue to make the history of the Jewish people your life story and the life story for your children and your grandchildren.

So yes, in my opinion, you are a little like Abraham. And, yes you are a little like the Goldberg's. And I find something very admirable and beautiful in that. And I am proud to be part of this community. So, give your neighbor a knowing nod.