

The Times, They are a Changing

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Throughout my life, I have been a watcher of the waves. On Jones Beach and Fire Island as a child in New York; Cape Cod and the Maryland shore as a young man; the Mediterranean in Israel, Spain and Greece, and of course, the Pacific, here in our backyard in my later years. Even when there are long periods when I am not at the beach, the waves are in my thoughts when I need a comforting or quiet place to go to in my mind. I stand on the shore and the waves come in and out; sometimes quietly, other times with a roar, always with a rhythm all their own that cannot be predicted. The movement of the ocean is a reminder for me that, try as we might, we cannot freeze life. It's like trying vainly to hold sand in our fists, as the grains run through our fingers.

The waves are always moving as life is always moving, never staying in place. The earth, the universe, time, the seasons, growth and decay, nothing stands still; all is in motion. Sometimes the motion is slight, small ripples in our life and sometimes it is of tsunami proportions: A driver hurtles through a red light, a company is suddenly bought out, a stroke, a fall on the ski slopes or on the side of the bed, a lump, an acceptance letter, a job offer, a promotion, a grant, an engagement ring, a dear John letter, a chance meeting. The only certainty about life is change.

Our Torah portion for this morning tells us how life changed for a husband and wife thousands of years ago. The Boss said move, and so they moved, leaving friends and family behind to take up residence in a new place, not knowing a soul. They had little income, at first, but over time, business was good. They had a child. The American dream, really: A place of their own to live, security for their old age and a wonderful son who brought laughter to their lives.

And then, in the blink of an eye, came the summons to Abraham: "Kach na et bincha": "Take your child, your only one, the one whom you love, bring him to a place that I will show you, and there, offer him up as a sacrifice." And in that moment, Abraham's world and the world of his family is turned upside down.

For many, many of us, here, this past year has seen enormous changes. Some of us have lost loved ones; some have welcomed new life into their arms. Some of us have had children who have left home; others of us have children who have moved back again to live with us. Some are struggling with serious illness or disability.

All of us have been impacted by the plunge of the stock market, the loss of consumer confidence. We worry about salary freezes, salary cuts, and job layoffs. We worry about less orders, fewer clients, reduced sales, and money that is impossible to borrow. Those who were fortunate to have money put away or pension plans, woke up, to find, in the blink of an eye, that a third of it had been swallowed up. The value of our homes, our nest egg for the future, has gone down and shows no sign of a continued, slow decline.

Life, the world, the economy, has shifted for all of us. Our easy confidence in the future has been eroded; our worry about the future has increased exponentially. In the blink of an eye, our world has changed; for some of us significantly, for others of us radically, and for a few of us, totally.

So what are we to do? How will we survive? What will help us get through today and tomorrow?

There is the story of a young woman, a number of years after her college graduation, who met the president of her alma mater and she says to him, "You know, years ago, at my graduation, when I came up in the line to receive my diploma from you, you said some words to me that have been of enormous help during my life." "I did?" said the university president, "What were they?" And the young woman answered: "Keep moving. Keep moving."

That's what Abraham does when his world is turned upside down. He sets out on the journey. "Vayakom vayelech": He arises and goes forth. Abraham is in motion. I want you to notice what is not in the text: Abraham does not say to God: "Why me?" He doesn't say: "I can't believe this has happened." He doesn't spend his time sitting in his tent bemoaning the pending loss of his son, the reversal of everything in his life. Vayakom vayelech: he gets up and he moves.

When our world is suddenly threatened or turned upside down, we need to be in motion. Movement can create something new. "M'shaneh makom, m'shaneh mazal", goes an old Jewish folk saying: "Change your location, change your luck." Staying frozen in place will produce neither change nor remedy.

Perhaps the oldest Jewish joke ever told involves the announcement by the scientists of the world that in 30 days there is going to be a great flood, as great as the flood in the time of Noah, and all the earth will be covered by 2 miles of water. The pope proclaims that the thirty days left are to be spent in fasting, giving away our possessions and preparing to meet God for judgment. The hedonists declare a time to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we will die, and the Jews proclaim that we have 30 days to learn how to live under water. We must, in times of trouble, keep moving, "keep swimmin' or we'll sink like a stone."

That's why, in ancient Israel, when those who had become ritually impure were healed, they immersed themselves in a stream of running water before reentering the camp. That's why, when one converts to Judaism or a bride wants to mark that she is passing from singlehood into marriage or a male wants to mark that the end of the week has come and the Sabbath is beginning, they enter the flowing waters of the mikvah. That's why it was necessary for our people after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, to pass through the parted waves of the Red Sea before they could be free. Water is in motion, and so must we be, as well.

So Abraham sets forth, taking Isaac and the two servants with him. They travel for three days and arrive at the foot of the mountain and Abraham says to the servants: "Stay here with the donkey. Isaac and I are going up the mountain to offer a sacrifice and then we'll return." And then we'll return. Either Abraham is lying to the servants, lying to Isaac, lying to himself or else there is something else at work, here. Perhaps, in the midst of his terrible predicament, Abraham hopes.

Now, hope is different than optimism. An optimist believes that at this moment, everything is all right. One who hopes, however, knows that right now, life

is awful; the present moment is dangerous, or calamitous or worrisome but hopes that, one day, everything will be all right. The Hebrew word for hope, tikvah, as in the Israeli national anthem, HaTikvah, The Hope, comes from the same root as mikvah, the flowing waters. As the waves move, as the water is in constant motion, life, too, we hope, will move on. Where we are today, is not where we will be tomorrow.

So, for Abraham, hope is somewhere ahead, perhaps on the top of the mountain which he sees. And as they set forth, Isaac says to him, "Father. Here is the wood and the knife for the sacrifice but where is the sheep? And Abraham replies to his son, not with lies but again with hope, hope against the grim reality he faces: "God will provide a sheep for an offering, my son. Hope. Just ahead, out of sight, the ram must, it must be waiting there in the bushes to be offered instead of his son.

The story of Abraham and what he does in the midst of his world of great turmoil is the story of the Jewish People and needs to be our story, today. How many lands over the centuries have we been expelled from, imprisoned, overly taxed, isolated, persecuted, murdered? And yet, our people kept looking up, hoping for better days, ahead. What is the Jewish longing for the Messiah and the Messianic age but a religious metaphor for hope? Hope that recognizes the predicament that we're in and yet refuses to give up. Hope that instructs us that though these are tough times, real and grim, the future will be better. We need to continue, like Abraham did, to look up. The mountain that Abraham climbed, hoping against all odds, is called the mountain of vision. The envisioning of that which, at first, was not, yet the insistence that at some point, it would be.

It is not foolish then, for us to hope that there will be better days ahead. Rather, it is necessary, it is vital, and it goes to the very heart of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew is to hope when all around us there is despair. It is to believe that the waves, that the ever-moving waters can and will, in time, wash away our present straits and bring something else in their place.

Mikvah and tikvah: movement and hope. I think there is another lesson for us, as well, in the story. There are rabbinic commentators who suggest, that when Isaac asked his father where the lamb was for the sacrifice, Abraham turned to Isaac and said, "You are, my son." So now, Isaac's world is also turned upside down. And yet, what is remarkable is the next line which occurs: "And the two of them walked on together." They walked on together. They journey forth toward an uncertain future, one with the other.

In a world that for us has become so unstable, in a year that has suddenly robbed us of our security, of our too easy optimism in the good life that would continue to be ours, in changing times that have "shaken our windows and rattled our walls", we need one another to get through this. Life, for a while, perhaps a good while, is going to be harder than we expected or wanted. All we can do is to take each other's hand and walk on together.

To be a Jew is to be a member of a community. We are called Mikvai Yisrael, for mikvah means not only flowing water, not only hope, but also means a collection, a gathering, just as water is gathered together. In a world in which community no

longer has much meaning, we must be a community to one another during these hard times.

We need to continue to go forward with hope, and we need to do it together. That means we've got to be a help to those in our community who are currently between jobs. We need to walk with them. Those of you who are between jobs or whose income has suddenly taken a disastrous turn need to speak up and say: I need help, come walk with me and those of us who are doing ok right now, need to step forward and say: I'm here to be a companion on the way. We need to be together, as we are together on this day, so that we may draw strength from one another. To be a Jew is ultimately not about what we believe, it is about what we do and it is about what we do with one another.

The great American Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, told the story that when he was a child, he went to the synagogue with his grandfather on Rosh Hashanah and heard, there, the story of Abraham and Isaac. After services, walking home with his grandfather, and not being able to get the story out of his head he asked him: "Zaide, what if the angel was late? What if he didn't get there in time to stop Abraham?" His grandfather explained to him that angels are never late, and then stopped and added sadly, "but we, we are often late and sometimes, do not arrive, at all." We need to be with one another in the days ahead.

Mikvah, tikvah, mikvai: Keep moving, have hope, walk together. Three deceptively simple but yet profound ways to get us through. That is why we read this troublesome and difficult story on our holiest of days, for in the end, it is a story of how we are to survive in the world. In our time, in our world, there will be no magical reversal of what life has presented us with. But there is a time honored way from our tradition to help us get through. For some, it will mean just being able to get out of bed in the morning and spend another day sending out resumes and making calls. For others, a profound appreciation that we have our health and that we have the ability to work. For still others the comfort and strength and support to be derived from those around them.

Let us, indeed, worry about what tomorrow will bring. Let us acknowledge that the world is a more uncertain place than we planned on it becoming but let us continue to journey, let our hearts be filled with hope that just up ahead, still out of sight, is the ram. Let us be waters of hope to one another, let us be rivers of movement, let us take each other's hand and walk together into the future, which lies ahead.