Rabbi David Wolkenfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
Vayera 5776

The Courage of Our Convictions

In the years of hosting guests at my Shabbat and yom tov table, my greatest regret is that I never kicked anyone out of my house. Allow me to explain.

I first enrolled as a student at Yeshivat Hamivtar, in Efrat, in the summer of 1998, Zman Ellul 5758. It was only there years since the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin and religious communities in the West Bank were still grappling with the implications of his murder. As the third anniversary of the murder approached, at precisely this time of year, Rabbi David Walk, who taught the “level 2” Talmud class in which I was enrolled at the time, told us about life in Israel, and in particular about life in Efrat in the months prior to the assassination. Rabbi Walk told us that in the months leading up to the assassination he, Rabbi Walk, confronted four guests at Shabbat meals in his home who, at Rabbi Walk’s Shabbat table, had called Rabin a “traitor.”

Rabbi Walk told those guests that they could either apologize and retract those comments, or they could leave his home. Two of the guests apologized. Two left his home. That story has stayed with me through the decades as an example, plucked from the pages of history, of the vitriol and divisiveness that infected our community in the months prior to the assassination. And, the story remains a model for me, guiding normative behavior, for how one acts in the presence of someone saying something offensive, or vulgar, or cruel, or dangerous.

Why have I never asked someone to leave my home? Well, for one thing, the most offensive remarks I’ve ever heard were made by those who at the time were my hosts. It’s a lot harder to kick oneself out of a home. But, more honestly, I’ve never confronted someone over their speech in the way that Rabbi Walk did because it’s always easier to go along to get along. I am more likely to smile awkwardly when someone, tells a racist joke, or shares a scandalous piece of lashon harah, rather than confront the offender. The Talmud tells us that failure to speak out in protest renders one culpable for the crimes and sins of one’s time. But it is so hard for us to muster the conviction necessary to risk social isolation, ridicule, or even persecution for the sake of being steadfast in our beliefs, our values, and our core commitments.

Avraham is the hero of iconoclasm, the hero of refusal to compromise on values, and someone filled with the courage that comes from being confident in ones vision and in one’s values. We need to channel some of Avraham’s spirit to speak up with greater moral clarity when necessary if we are to shift the trajectory of our community. We need the courage of our convictions in order to exercise leadership within our families, among our friends, in our communities, and within the world at large.

The greatest unasked question in the Torah is “why Avraham?” The Torah picks up the story of Avraham in media res, as God selects Avraham for a special mission. Midrashim and commentaries respond to the Torah’s deafening silence. Avraham discovered God as a child and destroyed the idols in his father’s shop. Or, Avraham was a philosopher and after decades of philosophical speculation and inquiry, realized that there was only one God, the Unmoved Mover and First Cause of all existence in the universe. No matter which backstory is more plausible to you - no matter which prequel you prefer, Avraham was willing to think differently and was willing to act differently in consequence of the way that he understood the world.

When the King of S’dom wishes to reward Avraham for playing a decisive role in a war that the king of S’dom and his allies win, Avraham refuses any reward:

אָמַרְתָּו אַבְרָֽם׃ אֲנִ֖י תֹאמַ֔ר וְלֹ֣א מִכָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לְָ֑}
Can you imagine saying something like that to a king or anyone with fame or power? After the stress of battle, and amidst the elation of victory, the king offers wealth and honor to Avraham, and Avraham is able to turn it down because he already understands that accepting a gift from the King of Sdom is morally compromising.

The binding of Isaac, Akedat Yitzchak, the climax of our parashah this morning and one of the most dramatic episodes in Jewish history can be read in a similar way. Avraham’s stubborn and steadfast faith, the courage of his convictions, allow him to endure the ordeal of the akeidah.

Rabbi Yoel bin Nun, one of the greatest living Tanakh scholars and teachers has a disagreement with his wife about the akeidah. According to Rav Yoel, Avraham went through the ordeal of the akeidah prepared to kill his son. And that may be the simplest way to read the story. But every year, at Parashat Vayera, Rav Yoel Bin Nun’s wife objects. As she reads the story, Avraham had complete faith, from the beginning of the story though to its end, that Yitzchak would, somehow, be spared. God had promised Avraham:

Can be translated to: Yitzchak would be the surviving child of Avraham who would continue Avraham’s spiritual and biological legacy.

This interpretation - at least this year - is quite compelling to me because it is based upon this characteristic of Avraham that I have been speaking about - perseverance and courage of convictions. Avraham holds on to his commitment to beliefs even in the face of obstacles. Avraham is able to pass the test of the akeidah because he never looses his faith that God would spare his son. He tells the lads who accompany Yitzchak and Avraham to the location of the akeidah:

“We will return”

As Avraham and Yitzchak begin their ascent together, Yitzchak, poignantly, asks his father about the missing animal for the offering. Avraham responds:

Avraham tells Yitzchak that God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering Avraham was not deceiving his son. He was expressing his complete faith that things would turn out OK. Avraham had the courage of his convictions. God had made a promise to Avraham and Avraham’s entire life was built around that promise from God. He did not let obstacles or challenges to that promise divert him from his commitment to his covenant with God.

That’s the sort of faith that we need to emulate. We have to identify our values, clarify our core commitments in life, and separate from falsehood and distractions. And after we do that, we need some of Avraham’s ferocity. We need some of Avraham’s zeal. And we need some of Avraham’s grit and stubbornness.

This can energize us to change the world. But even when changing the world is not on the agenda, this spirit can fortify us as we try to live our lives with integrity and authenticity. Living a life of integrity sometimes requires us to risk offending others. Living a life of authenticity requires us, at times, to risk being ridiculed by others. And maintaining our faith in a vision for our future requires a stubborn persistence in the face of obstacles and the temptations of despair. But this is precisely what the Torah demands.

The Irish poet Yeats wrote of the danger that comes into the world when only extremists, of one kind or another, possess the passion to shape the word:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; 
The best lack all conviction, while the worst 
Are full of passionate intensity.

We need to be the best and we need to fill ourselves with passionate intensity.