

A World on Fire: A People Called to Respond

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Olam chesed yibaneh עולם חסד יבנה (4X)

When I first heard this song, I must confess I wasn't crazy about it. Which made me feel bad since a friend and colleague wrote it, and it's become a sort of anthem of the Jewish justice movement. But there was something presumptuous about it. The English words that follow speak of building this world from love: "I will build... you must build... if we build, *then* God will build this world from love. If you look at Psalm 89 from which the Hebrew is taken, it says, "*ki amarti olam chesed yibaneh*, The Psalmist declares God's *chesed*, God's love, God's loyalty is steadfast. "Olam" here doesn't mean "world" but "enduring." The Psalm is all about the Almighty's power to affect the natural order – space and time – and God's enduring commitment to the Jewish people!

And then the Psalmist laments how the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* has essentially been asleep at the wheel, abrogated the divine messianic bargain: "You have rejected, spurned, and become enraged at Your anointed. *Ne'arta b'rit avdecha!* You have repudiated the covenant with Your servant... How Your enemies, O Lord, have flung abuse, abuse at Your anointed at every step" (v. 39-40, 53). And then it ends, abruptly: *Baruch Hashem l'olam Amen v'Amen*, blessed is the Lord forever!" What chutzpah! God, you have the power. You control the world. You control our lives. You dropped the ball... Blessed be Your name.

But the chutzpah of Rabbi Menachem Creditor when he wrote his song is a different sort of chutzpah – not the chutzpah to praise despite injustice, but the chutzpah to fight, to work, to build, despite a recalcitrant God. We fix it together and maybe then, God will get the message!

I will build this world from love... yai dai dai
And you must build this world from love... yai dai dai
And if we build this world from love... yai dai dai
Then God will build this world from love... yai dai dai

So why didn't the song resonate with me? Because, I look around at the world, and I don't see much love right now. I see pain. I see anger. I see willful blindness and cowardice. I see a world on fire. And when the world is burning, who feels like singing? I don't know if Abraham, our father, felt like singing, but the midrash tells us he did notice the world is on fire.

Here's the teaching that's grabbed hold of me these days and won't let go:

אמר רבי יצחק משל לאחד שהיה עובר ממקום למקום,
וראה בירה אחת דולקת

"Rabbi Yitzchak said: [Abraham] was like a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a bira doleket, a burning palace. He said, "Is it possible that this palace lacks a person to look after it? The owner of the building peeked out [of a window] and said, "I am the Master of

this palace.” Similarly, because Abraham our father [seeing the world on fire] said, “Is it possible there is no one in charge here?” the Holy Blessed One peeked out and said to him, “I am the Master of the Universe.” ... Hence, God said to Abraham, Lech Lecha... (Bereishit Rabbah Lech L’cha 39,1).

Abraham and his family feature prominently on Rosh Hashanah. The Torah reading today is about the birth of Isaac and the strained relations between Sarah and Hagar. Tomorrow we read the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac story. If Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, then Abraham represents the dawn of a new way of looking at that world. We often think of Abraham as a man of faith, perhaps the quintessential man of faith. After all, who would accept the charge of an unknown deity, sending him on an unnamed quest to a mysterious land? What kind of man would allow this God to ask for his son’s life?

When confronted by these questions, we often look to the classic midrash about Abraham destroying his father’s idols. He understood, we surmise, that objects fashioned of wood or stone can’t act in this world. There is an Actor, a Creator, who formed the universe, set it in motion, who cares about its fate. Abraham, the true believer, recognizes there must be something, someone beyond the earth, the sun, moon and stars. “*Ata moshel b’geut hayam*, You rule the swelling of the sea,” sings the Psalmist, “*b’so galav Ata t’shabchem*, when its waves surge, You still them” (Ps. 89:10). Abraham sees beyond the veil and glimpses the One worthy of worship.

But what if we’re getting it wrong? What if the one peeking through the curtain isn’t Abraham but God? What if the more important midrash isn’t the one about the idols, but the one about the world on fire? What does that story tell us about the man who would be the first Jew? The first monotheist? The one worthy of God’s attention? Think about it for a moment, what is the midrash on *bira doleket* revealing to us about the character of Abraham?

First, he notices the burning palace. Don’t think this is a given. Human beings have a boundless capacity for denial. We ignore, obfuscate, justify, placate – we are the masters of deception of ourselves. But Abraham, wandering from place to place, he notices the fire. Second, Abraham cares. This too we shouldn’t take for granted. Because plenty of people notice suffering, and some respond with well-wishes or paypal donations or by rolling up their sleeves as so many did after the uprising here in Baltimore. But others don’t care, or even if they do, they don’t have the courage to speak up. Which brings me to Abraham’s third praiseworthy character trait: he sees something, he says something. *Lo tuchal l’hitalel*, says Deuteronomy (22:3), one shouldn’t remain indifferent. We must get involved.

But Torah will not arrive for some 800 years. Abraham has to find his own words. And how does he speak up? What does he say? Here’s where it gets interesting: Abraham denies God’s existence! The world is like a majestic palace on fire, so perhaps the master’s away?! There’s no one home?! Or maybe there’s never been anyone home?! Maybe the world is like a factory fire and we, nihilistically, are its victims?! A flaming world is one of anarchy not meaning, not purpose and certainly not faith. According to the midrash, Abraham isn’t a pagan before he’s a monotheist – he’s an atheist! And it’s his denial, his public vociferous heresy that goads God out of hiding. God, in the midrash, peeks out through curtain and says “*hineyni*, here I am!”

And if the story stopped here, *dayeinu*, it would be a pretty compelling tale...but not a Jewish one. Because we know, the reader knows, that Abraham has a journey ahead of him. What is *Lech L'cha*? What is God's call to the first Jew to leave all that he knows and go to the Promised Land? It's a divine repartee! Abraham says no one's in charge of this pyrotechnic mess. God says, "I am, but I didn't *start* the fire!" (Who knew, the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* is a Billy Joel fan?). I didn't start the fire, and I'm not gonna put it out. You are."

How does Abraham become a man of faith? He listens. He learns. He takes responsibility not for kindling the world but for mobilizing an army, a legion of family members and followers, those of his faith, and those whose faiths would grow out of his but who say we're mad as hell and we're not gonna take it anymore! David Simon, one of our congregants, sent out a great tweet recently. It was an image from an amateur photographer of a burning hillside in Oregon's Columbia Gorge and a bunch of white guys in the foreground playing golf. He suggested this is the quintessential visual metaphor for America today.

Abraham is, among other things, a warrior for social justice. You think it's an accident he calls God out at Sodom and Gemorrah? That he negotiates for every life he can. That this neophyte has the chutzpah to say to God "*Hashofet kol ha'aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat?* Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice?" This give and take, this shared responsibility for the state of the world is at the core of Jewish faith. We are God-wrestlers, as Jacob discovered in the dark of night, on the banks of Yabok. We call God to task who in turn calls upon us to journey to strange lands. And when we find the world is burnt, in places, beyond repair, we don't get to give up. We don't get to go home. We build it again, and we do it with compassion and clarity of purpose. Yes, we build it with love.

So, I guess I've come to appreciate Rav Menachem's song. On this Rosh Hashanah, may the shofar awaken us to the work before us. Like a siren calling holy firefighters forth, may we not turn aside, not remain indifferent, but stay woke. And as we do so, let's remember you can't really fight fire with fire. That's stupid, you fight fire with water. You fight ignorance with knowledge. You fight anger with compassion. You fight hate with love. The world is on fire, and no one is going to put it out but us.

Oh, and one more thing: if the civil rights era taught us anything, it's that you fight injustice with song:

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Then God will build this world from love... yai dai dai