

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah - Vayaerah

One of my dearest friends in the world is a dietician who teaches the “what the heck” problem. People on a diet will open a pack of Oreo cookies, intent on eating only one or two. By the time they realize what they have done, five or six are missing. “what the heck” the person cries and says, “I have blown it this far, might as well finish the rest of the package.” We know the reverse to be true, as well. Having worked hard to take off over 60 pounds thus far, I am just not going to put those Oreos in my mouth to begin with. And, while these cute but trivial examples are easy to understand, we know that the truth behind the examples is all too real. Each step on a journey makes the next step in that direction that much easier. Where we see it as a blessing, we need to go forward. Where it is the curse, we need the strength to turn back. Whether it is telling a lie to bolster the previous lie that you told, the slippery slope that leads from recreational narcotic use (or even prescription narcotic use) into drug addiction, we know that the further we fall, the easier it is to fall faster. Often, we lose control of the fall and the world crashes down around us, leaving us feeling powerless to make it stop. We also know that where we establish ourselves in the doing of good things, we find ourselves defaulting to do even more good things. Whether it is visiting the sick or feeding and sheltering the homeless, it seems that the more we do, the more we want to do. The more we do of either, the blessing or the curse, the more of the same we end up doing.

Along these lines, I took a slightly twisted look at this week’s Torah portion (I know, so what else is new?). Lost in this week’s Torah portion that includes the “Binding of Isaac” story is the story ... before the story. First, Abraham stood up to God, and negotiated with God, in defense of the people of Sodom. He implored to God, “Will the judge of the world not do justice?” Even after this valiant effort, he watched the city dissolve under its own iniquity. While not even his own family, he took this loss deeply personal.

After the birth of Isaac, the text then tells us that Abraham really wrestled over whether or not to honor Sarah’s command to throw Ishmael and Hagar out of camp. God had to instruct Abraham to heed his wife’s command. For all the years Sarah thought that she and her husband could not have a child because of his impotence, it was really her own. It took one night with Hagar (her maid servant) to father Ishmael. Having watched her husband make a family with another woman for many years, now, with a son of her own (Isaac), she does not have to put up with her servant’s insolence (the midrash teaches that Hagar lorded her own fertility over that of her master). But still, this was Abraham’s first born son. It had to be a difficult order to obey, but Sarah was his wife, and even while he only had a child with Hagar at Sarah’s insistence, he had to take care of his wife – first. Once, however, the decision was made to heed his wife’s call to part with Ishmael, it was later much easier to part with Isaac, when God called – thus the story of the binding of Isaac.

It was not that Abraham did not love his sons, it was that his psyche was damaged; his heart was scarred. He had fought the big fight and lost. He tried again and lost. By the time it was Isaac’s turn to go, there was no fight left. God had sought a champion, and as I see it, Abraham had failed, he gave up and let himself wallow. Throughout history, we know that the easiest way to defeat an opponent is to wear him down. We know that in athletic training or job preparation, the toughest tests prove who will

succeed and who will fail. "Adversity is nothing more than a higher obstacle on the path to success." "What doesn't kill you will serve to make you a better person." We have all seen and heard these motivational statements, and the reality is that we know that they are true. We know that we all suffer times of despair; there are times when the roof feels like it is about to cave in. Certainly this has been the story of our people. In each generation, though, we have fought back against adversity and have not only survived, but flourished, as well. And we all know personal stories of people who have faced the greatest of adversity and still found their way back to being whole. Abraham was not the champion; Moses would earn that status several hundred years later, as he faced everything God and the world had to throw at him, but as Frank Sinatra put it, he stood tall and did it his way. Each of us has an obligation to look past the obstacles that get thrown into our lives. Each of us also has an obligation to help those around us over theirs, as well. What is missing from the Abraham story is the strength to overcome. Every day we read about lives falling apart, and every day there are the stories of resurgence and success. In truth we need each other, but as a greater truth, we need to commit ourselves to our own healing, for no one can do it for us. May we find strength to overcome all that comes our way. May we find strength to celebrate each and every blessing. Shabbat Shalom.