

AMERICA: ILLUMINATED AND ON FIRE

HOW CAN WE MAKE PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

The Source Text: Genesis Rabbah 39:1.

“Adonai said to Abram, ‘Go you forth from your land...’”(Genesis 12:1) ... Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *bira doleket* [translated as a palace that is aglow, either because it is full of light or in flames]. He said, “Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it? The owner of the building looked out and said, “I am the owner of the castle.” Similarly, because Abraham our father said, “Is it possible that this castle has no guide, no one to look after it?,” the Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, “I am the Master of the Universe.” ... Hence, God said to Avraham, Lech Lecha.

As Rabbi Rosenthal notes, the meaning of this parable depends on how one understands the word “*doleket*.” In either case, notes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Abraham is marveling at the state of the world, and asking who is responsible for it. If we translate *doleket* as “full of light,” then Abraham’s certainty that there must be a God comes from his sense of wonder at the marvels of this world. “How could such marvels exist if not by design?” If we translate it instead as a palace “on fire,” then we can understand his question as: “The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?”¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think is happening in this midrash?
- (b) Why do you think the Rabbis chose to describe the palace as *doleket*, a word that be translated as either “illuminated” or “on fire”?
- (c) Is either translation more compelling to you?

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, chs. 10 & 39.

Considering the translation that the palace is “on fire,” Rabbi Heschel notes: “There are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of wonder, in moments of joy; there are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of horror, in moments of despair. It is both the grandeur and the misery of living that makes man sensitive to the ultimate question.”

- (a) What is the “ultimate question” to which Heschel is referring here?
- (b) Do you tend to connect to or question the Divine (or a sense of purpose) more readily in times of joy or times of despair? Which prompts you to grapple with “the ultimate question”? Can you identify particular moments in your life, good or bad, where you have been confronted with the idea of Divine presence or absence?

From the sermon:

Rabbi Rosenthal writes, referring to the societal upheaval occasioned by the recent election:

If you are among those that see the birah doleket and interpret it to be a house on fire, if you are scared, know that we, your rabbis and cantors, your teachers and your Central synagogue community are standing with you and will do everything in our power not to let you fall. Together, we will find hope and strength and a way forward.

And if you are among those who see the birah doleket only as a house illuminated, who see this only as a moment of shining opportunity and cannot see the flames licking at the heels of another, perhaps we can try to put ourselves in the position of those who are feeling singed by the heat.

We each need to ask ourselves, how can we hold the same America as both a luminous country and a country on fire? Who can reconcile these two visions? How will we bridge the gap?

Maybe one answer is tucked inside our Avram/Sarai story. The text tells us that Avram and Sarai take their servants along with them on their journey, a journey that the servants did not necessarily choose. The rabbis tell us that those servants were so captivated by Avram and Sarai’s vision of the future that they actually converted to follow God, too.² Avram and Sarai did not have to drag their support team, unwillingly, along the journey; they treated their servants with compassion, grace and even love. They carried them gently and protectively, making them partners on the path. And so both parties came together to forge a trail to the Promised Land that included and even required them all.

Perhaps, after nearly two years of watching conflicting viewpoints clash so fundamentally, we can take a page from our fore-parents’ story and make our next journey one of kindness, respect, and collaboration. The only way I know how to move

² Rashi on Genesis 12:5.

forward is to work like hell to make this next chapter can be one where we genuinely sit with the person we disagree with most, and extend our hand. Where we strive for real empathy—not symbolic compassion but the harder kind, where we ensure not just that our voices heard, but that we hear others. Because America is both: It is illuminated and it is on fire, and we need those who see both visions to do this work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you make of this midrash? If we apply it to our current situation, does it mean that one side or the other will need to “convert” in the end?
- (b) What are some things that inspire you about what is happening in America right now? What are some things that scare you or challenge you?
- (c) Rabbi Rosenthal suggests that to move forward, we should “genuinely sit with the person we disagree with most, and extend our hand.” Do you agree? What would it take for this to happen?