

**“Compassion over Passion”**  
**November 7, 2009 / 20 Heshvan 5770**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

Recently, we had the wonderful *zechut*, or honor, to have Neshama Carlebach with us. We are grateful to Nancy Grossman, Sherri Pearlstein, Rabbi Rozenwasser and their incredibly dedicated committee who brought Neshama to us. This weekend, we delighted in the sounds of her father’s melodies, as only a daughter could interpret them. For those who had heard him either in recordings or in person, they could hear the depth of his songs, as only Neshama could sing them. “There was something different about Shlomo. His sincerity elevated us and his music made that journey even sweeter. Shaul Magid, Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University, published in *Havruta: A Journal of Jewish Conversation* vol. 2 no. 1 (Summer 2009,) wrote of Shlomo Carlebach:

“For Shlomo, the evil of the Shoah was not a sign that the world hates the Jews, but a sign that human hatred can only be conquered by human compassion, not by revenge or retribution.”  
“A classic example of Shlomo’s post-Shoah humanism is the story he often told about the 20th Century Hasidic master, Rabbi Hayyim Shapira of Munkatch, who gave his disciple a blank piece of paper soaked in his tears. When the disciple hands a Nazi border guard this blank piece of paper, the guard salutes him and sends for a car to escort him to his destination in Germany. Fantasy? Insanity? Certainly. What would it take to do such a thing? To stare hatred in the face with the belief that hatred can (always) be erased, even the hatred of a Nazi border guard. It is this audacity that Rav Kook called “Messianic chutzpah” (*chutzpah de-meshikhei*).

The Munkatcher story is about traversing borders and how we create borders between peoples, communities and inside families. In doing so, we can foment hatred and alienation. National hatred is an extension of the hatred of the ones closest to you. Human history is refracted through the sibling and family hatred that stands at the center of the Hebrew Bible; from Cain and Abel, to Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Korah. In some way, this hatred, different in degree but not in kind, is the hatred that surfaced in the Holocaust. In the final years before his untimely death at age 69, Shlomo used to come every few months to Woburn, a suburb of Boston, to teach Torah to a small group at the home of a gracious host. A good friend and I used to tape all these sessions. In the Autumn of 1994, just a few weeks before his death, Shlomo was strapping on his guitar and taking his seat. I was kneeling next to him, taping our microphone to the microphone that was being used for amplification. As he was sitting down, characteristically tired yet uncharacteristically weak, he said to no one in particular, “Okay, *hevre*, let’s pretend we’re happy.” I may have been the only one who heard it. It struck me as the quintessence of his life, the narrows between utter brokenness and the unwillingness to give in to despair.”

That is the Abraham we meet in our torah reading this morning. It is an Abraham that is literally wounded and trying to recuperate. We meet Abraham this morning as he sat outside his tent. He is wounded but he has hope. He is hurting but he is looking up. *Vayera eilav adonai b’elonei mamre*. “And God appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre,” and then in the very next verse strangely the story changes, God seems to disappear and *Vayisa einav vayaar v’hinei shelosha anashim*, “and he looked up and he saw three men standing near him.”

Franz Rosenzweig makes an incredible point. He explains, “The story opens by saying, ‘God appeared to Abraham (18:1), but when Abraham applies the vision to his own world, he suddenly sees three men

standing before him.’ (18:2). Abraham is the religious man par excellence, for he sees God in the human situation. (*On Jewish Learning* ed. Nahum Glazer) What he is saying is that Abraham sees God and then immediately sees humanity. For Abraham, faith in God must reside in relationship with others. Immediately, that faith is translated into action on behalf of others. Abraham’s conviction is made visible through his interaction with others. We learn an important lesson and that is we can never let our belief in God be a divisive force in our connection with other human beings. We can never say my faith is more important than your well being. We must not sacrifice our connection to others because we have developed a relationship with God, for if we do, we have missed the point.”

When Hillel is asked, “What is the essence of Torah? What is the simple meaning of all of the Torah? What is the basic core principle of this entire system?” Hillel responds, “*V’ahvta l’reiacha comocha* – love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, how do we reconcile the final climatic story of this week – the binding of Isaac? Abraham gets caught up and misses the point. Abraham gets carried away and loses perspective? So we ask the question, if we take the story seriously, “How could Abraham think of killing his own son?” We’re all doing it. We have learned how to get along with our coworkers and our neighbors. We offer a kind word to the check-out person in the supermarket and the dry cleaners. We make playful banter with strangers we meet on the street, but with our families we fall short. The truth is, it is easy to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not so easy to get along with our relatives – our mothers and fathers, spouses, and siblings. Children all present the greatest challenge to love. Abraham can work a deal out with Avimelech but he makes believe his wife, Sara, is just a means to an end for him. It is Avimelech that offers the most dramatic advice to Abraham.

You remember the story. Abraham says to Sarah, “Make believe you are my sister so that the King will not kill me. She agrees and Avimelech takes her. When Avimelech is cursed by this action he pleads, “I had no idea.” He turns to Abraham and says, “Why didn’t you tell me? What is all the secrecy about? *Me asita lanu, me chatati lach?* What have I done? What have you done? Why didn’t you just tell me? What is with all of the secret plots and schemes? Why couldn’t you just tell me what is going on?” It’s a message that is lost on Abraham and it is the message we are supposed to learn. Then Isaac makes the same plea, “Tell me Dad, what is going on? I see all these things and it looks like there is going to be a sacrifice but I don’t see an animal. What’s going on?” Essentially, Abraham is quiet and gives no real answer. He shushes Isaac and that cannot be.

Abraham argues with God about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and they come to a resolution about how far each are willing to go. Then he encounters Avimelech, and again Abraham has a real conversation with Avimelech and they work it out – but when it comes to his family he loses his ability to engage. Sarah says banish Hagar and Ishmael and he just does. God says to Abraham, “Go and sacrifice your son.” Abraham concedes. Abraham negotiates deals for Avimelech but he can’t seem to negotiate a relationship with those who are closest to him. So, the message is abundantly clear. You see, it is easy to love your neighbor as yourself, it is just hard to love your family. The shoemaker’s children have no shoes.

Abraham sends his son, Ishmael, out to die in the wilderness. Abraham says to Sarah, “Make believe you are my sister so I won’t get killed.” On the other hand, Abraham goes to the mat for the strangers of Sodom and Gomorrah while we can almost hear his family screaming, “What about us?” We watch, we read, we analyze the text and the Torah engages us. We ought to be outraged, until we realize we too are

guilty of the same. Our outrage, when applied close to home, quickly turns to shame and embarrassment. “Abraham, how could you have done this? How could you have asked your wife to sacrifice herself for you? How could you send your son Ishmael out to die? How could you have taken your son Isaac to the altar?” Each scenario could have been easily avoided with just a brief conversation. When Abraham asked Sarah to make believe she was his sister, Sarah could have said, “I can’t do it. I know you are afraid – but we will work it out. I am flattered you think I am beautiful, I realize you are scarred even scared, but together we will prevail.” When Sarah demands the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham could have responded, “I can’t do it, I know you are afraid but we will work it out. I realize you are scarred, even scared, but together we will prevail.” When this week’s reading reaches its crescendo, with what is easily the most difficult, outrageous, and painful personal challenges in all of our incredibly dramatic history, and when God says to Abraham, *Kach na et bincha*, “Take your son..” *Vha’aleihu sham l’olah* offering him as a burnt offering. We beg Abraham from the deepest and most passionate place in our souls, we implore Abraham to say to God, “I can’t do it. I am afraid – but I can’t do it. I am flattered you think I am the right one, that I am the chosen one, that I have what it takes, but you must realize I am scarred even scared, and we’re going to have to work something else out.”

The same is true, not just of our families, but our family of Jews. This week I had the chance to sit with the religious leaders of Philadelphia. Together we sat, we broke bread and we talked about a moral society and a cessation of violence in our streets. We spoke of adult illiteracy and of teenage promiscuity. The dialogue was sincere and it was deep and it was meaningful and we are building a community of faith-based communities. It is easy, but again, it is easy to sit with my neighbors. It is easy to love my neighbors. It is my fellow rabbis that I have a hard time getting around the table. However, Shlomo had no boundaries. He embraced every Jew and he said it was possible. As I have told you a thousand times, when I was eight I met him after a concert he gave in father’s *shul*. He kissed me on the head and told me to pray strong. I keep praying from that achdus, that unity that we desperately need and that I know is possible. We need it in our homes, we need it in our *shul*, we need it in our community, and we need it in our world. I thank Neshama for coming here last night and for helping our voices reach a little higher. *Todah meirosh*. Thank you in advance for raising our souls tonight. I can’t tell you how grateful I am – our community has come together. Hundreds will gather together tonight. Nancy, Sherry, Rabbi Rozenwasser again, thank you.

This past Tuesday was the 15th Yahrzeit of Reb Shlomo Carlebach. On the 16th of Heshvan 1994, Reb Shlomo as those who loved, adored, and idolized called him, was summoned by God and took his last breath. Like Moses, he was also taken at high altitude as if to suggest that both of these great men lived on a different plain than the rest of us. However, the truth is, like Moshe, he lived among us. Comparisons abound and like Abraham, Reb Shlomo was a wanderer of sorts and like Abraham he brought a message of love to a world that urgently needs it. As Shaul Magid explained, “Shlomo changed the way Jews relate to their tradition and the world as only an itinerant could.” As I conclude my comments by asking you to turn in your Shabbat brochure and ask you to sing the words as Shlomo sang them. If you don’t know the words, hum the melody, and if you don’t recognize the tune then I offer you what Shlomo often offered as he often began, “Listen, my beautiful friends.”

*Kichu imachem...*