

Often Rabbi Chai introduces the Drash by saying we will be taught. I am a Preacher, and not a teacher, and as a Preacher I will repeat some ideas, I might have mentioned in a previous drash years ago.

We are all incensed when we hear of book banning. It is anathema to us as Jews. We are doubly troubled by sanitizing and rewriting history to make it more pleasant, to exorcize wrongdoing; we expect to hear the complete story and to learn from all its gruesome history.

For we are the people of a book, a people with a story – not a cyclical story like the myths of the nature gods – but a story in time – in history. To me, the Torah presents an oral history of our people, a story that was passed on from generation to generation and written down later.

Yes, there are various ways to read and interpret the Torah, by analyzing the language, by treating the text as

literature, or indeed, as myth. Our festivals, however, commemorate the story as history. But this is not just history as past, but as present, history as NOW.

2

Every time a baby boy is born and a brit milah performed, we reaffirm the covenant G-d made with Abraham who, He has selected to father a special people. Every Passover we tell and reenact the story – as though we were brought out of Egypt. At Shevuot, we celebrate the giving of the Torah – the way of life for our lives as free people in the community formed by G-d's loving choice.

This is our story: Promises to an ancient patriarch, who packed up and went to follow a divine destiny and promise. A faithful man who was willing to sacrifice all hope in fulfillment of that promise, out of a single-hearted devotion and love for the G-d he chose in response to his

being chosen. The story unfolds: Isaac, Jacob – on to Egypt, then slavery to the world's greatest power – then exodus, liberation, freedom -- the presence of G-d in the desert, covenant at Sinai – a law for how to live as G-d's people, as a true community in a new fertile land.

3

As contemporary Jews we are constantly making choices in how we observe Jewish law and custom, and how we conduct ourselves with and act ethically toward one another. The Torah presents us with a lesson plan to guide us to ethical behavior. Thus we cannot not edit out from Torah, but learn from its lessons.

However, there is perhaps too much told in this particular Parshah, Vayera, too many lessons for us. Too much fodder for the book banners to excise from the text.

To begin with, Abraham and Sarah are ever open to the eventuality of hosting guests. Indeed they are welcoming to the three strangers that Abraham has spied coming

toward their tent. He feeds them and offers them drink, teaching us the Mitzvah of hospitality.

The men are actually angels, G-d's messengers, and have been sent to tell the couple that in spite of their age, they will have a child. Sarah laughs, and indeed Jerry Lewis

4

said during a PBS special on Jewish humor, that this was the first Jewish joke. However, Sarah indeed has a child.

They become parents, Isaac is born. The book banning fundamentalists would accuse Sarah of blasphemy.

Further on in the text Abraham is asked by G-d to sacrifice the child, Isaac. His faith is tested but the child is saved. Later on in the text Lot willingly offers up his daughters for sport. Child sacrifice is surely a reason to ban the book.

Previously Hagar has had a child with Abraham. Hagar is Sarah's Shifra. The Hebrew word Shifra as Robert Alter translates as female slave in his commentary, but is

euphemistically translated as handmaiden. This child, Ishmael, is thus a brother of Isaac and as Isaac thrives the two become friendly. Sarah worries about this bonding and becomes jealous. She tells Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael out of their encampment and into the desert.

5

G-d commands Abraham to listen to his wife. However, Abraham makes sure that the exiles have lechem v'miyam, bread and water, for the journey. He listened to his wife for the sake of keeping peace in his home, Sholom Beyit, a lesson for us all. (By the way, G-d will provide for Ishmael and Hagar.)

Abraham has settled with his entire clan in the plain of Mamre. Nearby is the city of Sodom, a place of cruelty and debauchery. A city rich in minerals and industry but where there is no compassion for the poor and the needy and the stranger is not welcomed. This is anathema to

Abraham. G-d hears the cry of Sodom and vows to level the city. His plan is made known to Abraham who argues against destroying the whole city—the righteous along with the wicked. Abraham argues: if fifty righteous people

6

are found, would the city be spared? But there are not fifty, Abraham bargains from fifty to forty down to ten and even ten cannot be found. G-d has chosen to destroy Sodom. It is common to comment on the Chutzbah of Abraham for his arguing with G-d. Should we excise this passage?

Abraham suffers no consequences for he has been chosen not just for casting away the idols found in his father's home, nor for his journey from Ur, nor for his belief and obedience to G-d, but he favored because he lives a just and righteous life. He will impart his learning to his descendants, to us, through our Torah.

What are our obligations to G-d and to each other? It becomes obvious that we are responsible for each other, and the stranger among us, to be just, to act fairly. Furthermore, one is also responsible for the spirituality of

7

the community itself – that overall quality of life that enables or hinders the love of G-d. It is this responsibility to the community that invites and demands a commitment to social justice, to ending oppression. No community, nation or institution can be spiritually healthy and in conformity to G-d's will, if it ignores injustice, oppression and violence.

But now we come full circle – a virtuous circle. One must love G-d above all things and ultimately serve only G-d – one does this only in accepting responsibility toward each other and in working to make us truly a people living according to Torah. But where does one get the

motivation and the energy for such a life of effort in loving and struggling, only in the personal relationship of being loved by and loving G-d.

8

As we gain an understanding and appreciation of our history and we grow in gratitude, thankfulness, joyfulness, do we find the reasons, energy and enthusiasm to express our love for G-d in loving others and in working to build our community and the wider world – Tikkun Olam.

Shabbat shalom