

Rosh Hashanah 5773 – Temple Beth Abraham

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A Sense of Purpose

Twice in his life, Avraham heard a certain kind of call from the Holy One. "Go forth, move yourself -- to a place that I will tell you." These were the first divine words spoken to Avraham -- to go from one place to another. From his home and his homeland. To a land, said the Holy One, that I will show you. Not now, not yet, but soon.

And these were also the words Avraham heard at the *Akedah* -- "take your son... and go forth, move yourself toward the land of Moriah, and bring him up on one of the mountains, the one I will tell you."

Both times, Avraham got up and he went. Responding and moving. Each time, there was something obviously difficult -- to leave home, to offer up his son. But both times, too, there was this other element. Where am I going? What direction am I going in? Why not yet can I discern the place where I am supposed to live, the mountain I am supposed to climb?

In our lives, there are certain natural times of great movement, and great direction. Almost as soon as we come into awareness as children, we know that one grade in school follows another, that each year is a different place, and movement means growing. That's how we experience life from the first. We continue our studies, and we point ourselves or are at least pointed in some direction -- a major, a field of study, a chosen profession. The early years of our professions are full of direction -- first job, so much learning, promotions perhaps as well.

There is the time in life of courting and marrying, creating a family and not only watching it grow, but being involved in the growth and direction of children. Yes, there are times in our lives when the direction is clear.

We find direction not only in what we might think of as the script of an American life. At any point in life we may devote ourselves to a cause, in the community or the world. We may serve and lead in an organization or a major community project. These are callings, missions, that fill our lives with direction when we are involved in them.

Yet there are also other times, when direction is hard to find, or the path you thought you were on has been thwarted. When, like for Avraham, there is no clear destination, and we might doubt whether life has direction at all.

I know that for many in this congregation, these several years of the recession have been hard not just economically and financially. To lose a job has also meant for many people the sudden end of a road. A path of professional growth has been interrupted -- whether it's advancement in one's workplace, or the stimulation and excitement of continuing to learn about a field you've been involved with for many years. Where will I go now? How can I find not only a job, pay

the bills, but feel again a sense of direction? If this is the time for a change in career, a change in direction, how do I do that? It was so much easier before, in school, when life was all about options and there were so many directions to choose from with ease.

The disruption of a person's work sometimes makes you doubt whether the direction you thought you had was real, or wishful thinking. I know I felt that way a number of years ago, when I was laid off. I can remember speaking on the phone with a mentor of mine, who asked me what I hoped to be doing next. I thought I could say it, but she told me she had no idea what I was really saying.

And of course, loss of income disrupts the most important directions -- of what we want for our families, of our engagement in the community. Loss of job often means a forced move, a relocation but not a direction.

And just as there are many in our community who have been affected this way by the economy, there are also so many who are blindsided by illness, or who live chronically with conditions that seem to limit the possibilities in life. Who can talk of direction when it's a challenge just to feel good for a day, or when you don't know what the next days or weeks will hold.

And other things occur in our lives that put the lie to the sense of a straight path, or a defined direction. The death of a loved one, or the end of a marriage or a relationship -- these call into question the shape of our future, the trajectory we thought we were on, when those we hoped to share it with are no longer in our lives.

And even in the course of a less-disrupted life, there are times when we ask: Where is my direction? It sets in perhaps after years of working at the same job, when the thrill of the beginning, the team that started together, may be gone, and things are just coasting. But I know it's there too, in the years after a spouse dies, or when a major project in the community is complete, or when it's time to retire or complete what seems to be the major professional work of one's life. What do we do in the time of life that seems to be "post-direction"?

These are all the questions I can imagine were moving in Avraham's mind, during the two-plus days of walking that passed in a single verse in the Torah, until on the third day, "he saw the place from afar." Many commentators notice that how the days pass without any description in the Torah, without any report of words or actions. I'm sure Avraham was thinking about what led him here, and what the meaning would be of the mountain that God had promised to show him. Perhaps he thought: What kind of a God have I been following, if this is where it has led me? Did I throw away my life on an illusion?

The Izhbitzer Rebbe has a different take. In his interpretation, Avraham had already been thinking about the direction of his life in its recent years. The Izhbitzer notes that we have last seen Avraham feasting, basking perhaps in a sense of arrival and completion. His promised son Yitzchak was born and is growing; he has made peace with his neighbors, the Philistines, whom he has lived with in tranquility for many days. But in his mind, says the Izhbitzer, Avraham asks

two questions: Am I resting on my laurels? Have I finished living out the purpose of my life? And out of those questions comes the test of the *Akedah*, as if from inside Avraham himself.

But for some time, he doesn't know where it leads.

You may feel, today, like the shofar's long *tekiah*, the clear call mirroring a clear direction in your life. Or you may feel like the *sh'varim*, the broken up call, living with the sense that a road taken has been interrupted, or like the staccato *t'ruah*, simply looking to put two steps together. Or you may feel most like the silences between the notes. You may not know, right now, what your direction is for the coming year, or what it should be. You may worry that the coming year will not be a year of direction in the ways that you have known that before. Because you're not sure, or because of things outside your control.

But I want to tell you this. Even without a clear direction -- even if you are walking right now like Avraham, in the days of waiting to learn if there is a mountain to climb, and where it might be -- there is something even more constant than direction. Something that can't be taken away, by loss or illness, by economics or other people. Even without a clear direction, we can each day lead lives of *purpose*.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the great leader of Yeshiva University, taught that every person is a *shaliach* -- a representative of the Holy One. Everyone has a particular mission, designated just for them. In human life, he says, one person commissions another: to deliver a legal document, to create a work of art. The only difference is that we do not hear in words from the One who commissions us. Nonetheless, says the Rav, each of us has a unique purpose, a *shlichut* that is tailored to us.

In the prayers of Yom Kippur, we read these words: "Before I was formed, I had no purpose." Rav Soloveitchik says it's like this: I was not formed until this particular moment in time, in these particular circumstances. So it is to now, to whatever my circumstances are right now, and whatever my capabilities as a person are, that I must look to find my *shlichut*. For no one is expected to do what they cannot, and since each of us is different, what is expected will not be the same for any two people.

It's easy to think of direction in life as a script -- the path from childhood to college to settling down. Rav Soloveitchik frames it another way: as finding the purpose that suits each person uniquely, at this particular time in our lives. How do we discern? How do we know?

Jim Collins, one of the most thoughtful writers on leadership in the business world, talks about three circles. One circle is: What am I good at? The second is: What am I passionate about? And the third is: What does the world want? Your purpose, he says, is found in the place where those three circles overlap. Not just what I'm good at, and what I am passionate about. Not just those two, which to some extent I can control. But all three.

What is it that you are good at, and passionate about, and that the world wants -- and, I would

add, the world needs? At any time in life, those are questions you can answer. Jim Collins says that if you find that overlap, you can't help but succeed.

I can't tell you, of course, what you particularly are good at, and what you particularly are passionate about. Those are the things that Rav Soloveitchik says are unique to you as a person, to this point in your life, which may be different for you now even compared to a year ago.

But I can tell you something about the third factor: what the world wants, or needs. On the wall of the Gallery is a statement of guiding values of this congregation. They stand for things that a person needs in life, and that the world needs. They are inspired by the statement that is, to me, the essence of Judaism. In Pirkei Avot, Shim'on Hatzaddik is quoted as saying: *The world stands on three things -- on Torah, on Avodah, and on G'milut Chasadim.* On *Torah* -- on studying together, to achieve wisdom for life. On *Avodah* -- on spirituality, on the inner life, the mirror that helps each person find the image of God. On *G'milut Chasadim* -- on care and duty to each other, in our community and in the world.

If you look to these three things, you will find that the world needs you. For your *Torah* – the wisdom that you have to share, perhaps for a younger generation. For your *Avodah* -- for your ability to zero in on the most godly qualities, to become rooted in them. And for your *G'milut Chasadim* – for your service to other people, and to the community and the wider world. In any one of these three you can find something that you are good at and passionate about, and you will know that the world needs it. And in there, you will find your *sh'lichut*, your mission for this time in your life.

When I think of the people I know in this congregation, I am inspired by how people respond to the times in life when direction seems unclear. I sat this summer with a congregant, who has been in and out of the hospital many times. For weeks and months at times, she has not been able to go out, and much of the time she has felt very sick. I am astounded, frankly, that she is still alive. We were sitting this time in a good moment for her. Usually, I've been there just to listen, just showing up, with no particular conversation in my mind. But I asked her this time something I had been wondering, from my own standpoint of relative youth and good health: *How have you done this? How have you stayed alive?*

And she answered me -- but not the question I asked, the question of how. She answered the question of *why*. Very carefully, she said to me: "I stay alive to show people that you can, if you feel you have something to give. Even if what you're giving is just the idea that you can continue to be alive when things are difficult, because you care about other people."

I think of a congregant who is in a great deal of physical pain, and still in sadness over the loss of a loved one, with whom she shared not only her life, but years of building this community. And beyond the loss and the physical pain, she comes here, to make food or to make a weeknight minyan or to beautify a simcha luncheon with special touches.

I think of a congregant who has not had permanent work for a long time, but who has figured out

a way to do two things at once -- how to pursue opportunities and new skills, and to serve other people. She has taken workshops, which have led to projects that benefit nonprofits or help other people who are unemployed, and she volunteers her talents to the synagogue community to increase our programming and learning.

I think of a congregant who, when faced with a sudden illness, found a way to teach Torah and life wisdom, even on days of physical pain and weariness.

These are people who have found a *sh'lichut*, a purpose, for the moment they are in at a time when long-term direction might seem out of reach. They have found, in that moment, something they are good at and care passionately about, that intersects with what people need. Their *sh'lichut* has been about *Torah*, the wisdom they can share; and about *Avodah*, about the core, godly values that underpin all our lives, and about *G'milut Chasadim*, the care of others even when they themselves are in need of support and care.

There are times in our lives that are full of direction, of movement we can see and measure -- and there are times when we seem to hardly move, or when the movements are small, a step forward and a step back. There are times of great visions and plans, and times when we don't have them. But all of those times can be, should be, times of purpose.

Even for Avraham it was this way. We think of the great years of his life, called by God, living in Israel, welcoming strangers, fighting for justice. But it wasn't until he was 70 years old, says the Torah, that he truly found his purpose. When he arrived in Israel, he too was buffeted by things beyond his control -- by an economic downturn, by conflict in his family, by war. He doubted, and questioned, and when he needed to he turned to God, who affirmed a covenant beyond the moment he was stuck in. In his later years, after his own active years were done, he saw to it that his purposes would not end with him -- by securing the land he was promised, by finding a partner for his son Yitzchak to continue his dreams.

I hope that in the coming year, each of us can say that we are living with purpose, no matter where we may be on the map of our lives. And know that here, in this sacred community, your *sh'lichut*, your mission, makes a difference in our lives. As we prepare to hear once again the call of the shofar, each of us may resonate most with a particular call. *Tekiah, shvarim, teruah* -- clear, disrupted, or broken. But from all of those, may we hear together the greater whole, the echo of our whole community of purpose -- *tekiah gedolah*.

Shana tova.