

## *The Palace is On Fire And Full Of Light*

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*Yom Kippur 5785*

Yom Kippur is the holiday of transformation, of trust in new possibilities, of belief in our capacity to change. Our ancestor Abraham is a good role-model for such change and trusting in new possibilities. The first time God speaks to Abraham in Torah, God instructs Abraham to leave everything he knows behind and set out on a new path. As far as the story goes, this is utterly baffling... We know almost nothing about Abraham at this point, we have no idea why God is suddenly displaying interest in this person, or why Abraham so fully trusts a God he has never spoken to before. Yet trust he does...

Such gaps in storytelling are the bread and butter of classical *midrash* (textual commentary and interpretation), which treats such gaps not as a problem, but rather as a gateway and opportunity through which the ancient story can become our own.

In one such *midrash*,<sup>1</sup> the rabbis create a background story, a prior interaction between God and Abraham to explain the dramatic “*lech - lecha*” (“leave”) interaction described in the Torah. They compare Abraham to a traveler who is walking on the road when he sees a *birah doleket*. The word “*birah*” is pretty straightforward, it means a large building or a palace. The word *doleket* is more complicated and we will go back to it in a moment, but it is related to the word “*lehadlik*” that we say when we bless the candles, so it has something to do with light or fire. In any case, the *midrash* says that the traveler seeing the *birah doleket* is surprised. He stops and wonders upon seeing the seemingly abandoned building: Is it possible that this place does not have a caretaker? At that moment, says the *midrash*, God responds and says: I am the caretaker, I am the owner of this place.

Back to the בִּירָה דּוֹלֵקֶת:

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<sup>1</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 39:1

As earlier commentators on this *midrash* note, the word *doleket* could mean that the palace is full of light, or it could mean that the palace is going up in flames... This ambiguity obviously creates the possibility for two very different stories. What is it that the traveler, or Abraham, encounters on his journey? Is the palace burning down, or is it radiant with light?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book, *God in Search of Man*, reads the story both ways. Heschel believes that this story about Abraham is about the human journey to discover God. The search for God, Heschel taught, begins with wonder and mystery. It is only when the person traveling down the road of life realizes how full of light and beauty this magnificent world we live in is, that we begin our search for God. The story of Abraham is the story of a person who wakes up for long enough to have a moment of what Heschel calls “radical amazement” and from that moment he begins traveling with God.

But Heschel, who lost his family in the Holocaust (literally “the burning”), must also acknowledge the traveler who encounters a world going up in flames. For this person, or in these moments of life, the tone of the traveler’s question is accusatory. Have we been dropped into a world which has no caretaker? This too, Heschel says, is a truth of human religion and spirituality. It is also these moments of horror and despair that make humans sensitive to the ultimate questions.

These days it feels very much as if we are living in the second version of the story. Almost everywhere we look, it is as if the palace is on fire and the world is burning. A new Jewish year is beginning, but it is beginning in the midst of tremendous ongoing pain and suffering. As we look into the future of this planet and of this country, the image of a palace on fire feels real and scary. And yet, in our story, Abraham does not run away or give up. He stops in his tracks and he cares enough to respond, to challenge God to take responsibility, to create a partnership in caretaking. And God then challenges Abraham to set out on this journey without knowing where it will end.

But the ambiguity of the word *doleket* does more than tell us that two separate stories are possible. The word turning either way teaches us that at any given moment, in any situation, we can see light or we can see destruction. Rabbi Sharon Brous challenges

us to see both at the same time: “if all we see when we look at the world is heartache, we need to rediscover the beauty. And if all we see is endless beauty, we need to be reminded that there’s a lot of brokenness out there that needs fixing”.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us grew up with solemn Yom Kippur services. But that’s only one understanding of the day. Just as *doleket* holds multitudes, so does this holy day. We also know that today is one of the two most joyous days of the year:

לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב וּכְיוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים.

There were no days more joyous than the 15th of Av (Tu B’Av) and Yom Kippur”<sup>3</sup>

The *Mishnah* describes these two days as joyous, because they are dedicated to new love and new possibilities.

I love thinking about Yom Kippur as a joyous day. It is!

On this day we face mortality, but we also face possibility.  
Yom Kippur comes to teach us how much is possible.

You can make new choices!  
You can change,  
the world can change,  
our country can be different,  
we can look forward to something new.

How amazing this is!

We have gathered here as a community to support each other in saying, we are going to change!!, I am going to change!!, and you are going to change!!

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Sharon Brous: <https://ikar.org/wp-content/uploads/PICO-Prophetic-Resistance-Keynote.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ta’anit 4:8

We gather as a community to say that what is, doesn't have to be. It can also be different.

It is so sweet to hear this.

We need to hear this, especially now.

And we need to create vessels to hold and cultivate this resolve.

In the Haftarah<sup>4</sup> we read today, the prophet Isaiah offers two such vessels.

The Haftarah begins with a call to rebuild the road, to move away all blocks or obstacles that are in the way, so that God's people can live in freedom. The prophet raises his voice crying out, loud and clear, that religious ritual without moral action does not achieve the goals of a fast day, and concludes by reminding us that it is through Shabbat that we can get closer to the possibility of redemption.

Every year I find this reading powerful. On Yom Kippur we are told: you can change, we can change, the world can be different. But Isaiah gives us tools to realize the power of this day, so that it can go beyond pretty declarations and a one-day fast.

The first vessel to hold our communal resolve for transformation and make it real is care for the needy: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; house the homeless; heal the wounded. Isaiah teaches that when you take care of the least fortunate among you, God will be there. The possibility of redemption and hope is in your hands.

The second vessel Isaiah offers is in the instructions about Shabbat at the end of the Haftarah. Why does he shift from social justice activism to talking about Shabbat?

Rabbi Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl, known as the *Me'or Einayim*, explains that the essence of Shabbat is the experience that nothing is lacking.

He writes:

“A person engages in work in response to a need. There is something lacking that will be completed through the work. Shabbat, being perfect in all aspects,

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 57:14-58:14

lacks nothing, and needs no work to fulfill any need. Therefore our sages taught that you should celebrate Shabbat as if all your work is done and you lack nothing”<sup>5</sup>

Shabbat teaches us that we have to allow ourselves to really taste the experience of everything being okay, in order to truly believe that it is possible in our world. How can we believe that something is truly possible if we have never experienced at least a taste of it? Shabbat is a powerful symbol of a world transformed, of what life could look like if we do the necessary work. Even if we never get there, every Shabbat can move us a little closer.

Here we are at this Yom Kippur, and a gift is being offered to us, the gift to change, to grow, to move forward, to believe our country can change, our world can change, humans can do better. And I am ready to accept that gift. I hope you are too.

How do we anchor this change?

We remember our power and capacity that in any situation, we can choose to see light or to see destruction. If when we look up, all that we can see is a broken world, we need to work on rediscovering the beauty. And if all we see is beauty, we need to be reminded that there’s a lot of brokenness out there that needs fixing.

We act and commit ourselves to help the weakest. We care for other human beings. We don’t lose our humanity, we commit to create and build societies where people take seriously our responsibility to care for each other and we continuously uphold the vision and experience of a transformed world.

Our job as a community is to support one another and hold one another accountable. Together, we can change.  
Together we can create a better world.

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<sup>5</sup> Speaking Truth, Rabbi Art Green, Volume 2, page 161