

The Source for Ethical Behavior- Rabbi Brett Krichiver

Where does ethical behavior come from? How do we know, when we leap from bed each morning, how to handle the many and varied challenges that will inevitably meet us along the day's journey? With no Torah to guide us, not ethical teachings of our ancestors, isn't it just as likely that we would learn from experience to do the right thing?

Looking out into the world in the past few days and weeks, we might think not. We have been forced to speak out against a President who seem incapable of thoughtful or even civil discourse driving our country's national conscience into the ground, who has brought us to the verge of a real nuclear threat and insulted every ethnic group and gender, a new federal tax plan taking the wheels off the train of progress, an increasing awareness of our communal blindness regarding sexual harassment and abuse with the hashtag Me Too movement, and in our own city a decision not to bring charges against police officers who killed an unarmed black man, where do we turn to see the self-evidence of ethics and morality?

We do have our Torah to guide us, and although often it seems to be out of time and out of step with the modern world, this week there is simply no better text. The parasha is known as Vayera, and he looked. Notably, time and time again the stories contained in this week's text envision the importance of raising one's eyes to see what one could not see before. We see laid out before us in vivid high definition, the ramifications of our willingness to see and understand, and the consequences when we are unable, or unwilling to see.

Abraham firsts lifts his eyes to see three strangers, angels approaching, who tell him and Sarah of their good fortune in having a son. What would have happened, do you think, if

Abraham had not been sitting in the doorway of his tent in the heat of the day, to notice the travelers as they approached? Missing the opportunity to welcome them and thereby welcoming a son, our people might never have gone from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebekah, and down the generations.

The same travelers journey to Sodom and Gomorrah to save Abraham's cousin Lot and his family. But we are told that Lot's wife cannot look ahead of her as her city is destroyed. And when she raises her eyes to glance behind her, it is a different word that is used, not the word for sight, but the word for pausing, as if she becomes frozen in time, not seeing what is in front of her, but stuck in her past, like a pillar of salt.

In the most famous example, Abraham is commanded by God to take his son and offer him as a sacrifice on a mountaintop that God will show him. He lifts up his eyes after three days of walking to see the future home of Jerusalem, the city of peace, a scorched mountaintop. As he lifts up his eyes on top of that mountain, he comes to realize God does not demand the sacrifice of our children, but their elevation, and Isaac is saved.

In each story, a character is asked to see, to acknowledge, to understand. Often it is difficult or complicated to learn the lessons life has to teach, it takes experience and education – experience to place ourselves in the shoes of others so we might appreciate their point of view, and education to enlighten us when our own views become misguided. And as long as we are willing to not only admit but welcome those moments when we are wrong, or have learned something new that might broaden our own knowledge or perspective, then we continue to grow and develop strength, as individuals and as a community.

Here is the ultimate danger of the direction our society seems to be headed. It is no longer even acceptable to admit being wrong – that is the legacy of our President, and the many talking heads of the popularity contest we call the news. We have learned to entrench ourselves in one opinion, and to feed ourselves on a steady diet of those who reinforce those same opinions, rather than seeking out those from whom we might be challenged, who might push us to grow in uncomfortable ways.

Einstein wrote that anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new. And Roosevelt wrote that the only person who never makes a mistake is one who never does anything. Mel Brooks added that as long as the world is turning and spinning we're going to be dizzy, and we're going to make mistakes.

I am inspired even more by one detail of the Torah's version. Before destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their crimes, God wonders aloud about the wisdom in speaking with Abraham about the plan. God decides to include Abraham in the decision making process, because, God says, "I have created Abraham to do the right and the good, and to teach that to his children." We are here, all of humanity, not only to follow commandments, to learn rituals and the teach stories to one another. We are here to understand the much less concrete ideas of goodness and righteousness, and to bring those concepts to the world.

Last week I attended part of a national organizing conference entitled Prophetic Resistance. Along with hundreds of clergy and congregants from every denomination and just about every state in our nation, we explored ways to hold elected leaders and entire communities to our ethical standards. It means by definition to resist the pull of our own

comfort and stability to work towards economic, racial, gender and every other kind of equality and justice.

At the same time, Rabbi Fox attended an international conference in Morocco focused on interfaith dialogue across even greater divides. We look forward to hearing from him at Nefesh Shabbat this month. That is the work of a religious person – not to seek the opiate of religion to shut out the problems of the world and feel safe, but to join our voices together as brothers and sisters to bring freedom to those who are not yet free; to speak out for those who do not have a voice wherever and whenever we find them. To hold elected officials responsible to a higher level of decency in their words and actions, rather than excusing their behavior to ourselves or others in the name of party politics or a single political issue.

Let us lift up our eyes. Let us see with wisdom and understanding what is good and what is right before us. Let us look to the future and not find ourselves stuck in the destruction of the past. Let us learn to elevate one another through speech and action, and hold ourselves responsible for lifting up every one of God's creations, no matter the color of their skin or safety of their neighborhood.

If we can open our eyes even a little bit further on this Shabbat, we will have brought a little bit more of the ethics of our people, the lessons from our Torah into the world. And this world we find ourselves in, is sorely in need of those lessons. May our Torah nurture us, and bring light to the world, for many generations, and many Shabbatot to come. Amen.