

# LIFTING OUR EYES

## HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN HOPE IN THE FACE OF DIRE CIRCUMSTANCES?

### TORAH BLESSING

#### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Kolin focusses on the moment when Abraham, having bound Isaac for sacrifice, is interrupted by the angel, and “lifts his eyes” to see the ram that he will sacrifice instead:

<p><b>Exodus 22</b></p> <p><sup>10</sup> Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> Then an angel of Adonai called to him from heaven: “Abraham, Abraham!” <sup>12</sup> And he answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me. <sup>13</sup> <b>When Abraham looked up</b>, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.</p>	<p>י וישלח אברהם את-גִּדּוֹ, ויקח את- המאכלת, לשחט, את-בְּנוֹ  יא ויקרא אליו מלאך יהוה, מן-השמים, וילאמר, אברהם אברהם; וילאמר, הנני  יב וילאמר, אל-תשלח ידך אל-הנער, ואל- תעש לו, מאומה: כי עתה ידעת, כי-יִרָא אלהים אתה, ולא חשכת את-בְּנִדְךָ, ממני  יג וישא אברהם את-עיניו, וירא והנה-אֵיל, אחר, נאחז בסבך בקרניו; וילך אברהם ויקח את-האֵיל, ויעלהו לעלה תחת בְּנוֹ..</p>
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This is not the only place in this portion where Abraham raises his eyes to see something. Consider this passage from earlier in the portion, when Abraham is visited by the three mysterious visitors, who will tell him that Sarah will bear a child:

<p><b>Exodus 18</b></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Adonai appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of</p>	<p>א וירא אליו יהוה, באֵלֵי מְרָא; והוא ישב פְּתַח-הָאֵהָל, כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם</p>
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<p>the tent as the day grew hot. <sup>2</sup> <b>He raised his eyes</b> and saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, <sup>3</sup> he said, “My lord, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under a tree.</p>	<p><b>ב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו, וַיֵּרָא, וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָא, וַיֵּרָץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, אַרְצָה.</b></p> <p><b>ג וַיֹּאמֶר: אֲדֹנָי, אִם-נָא מְצֹאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ--</b> <b>אֶל-נָא תַעֲבֹר, מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ.</b></p> <p><b>ד יִקַּח-נָא מְעַט-מַיִם, וַרְחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם; וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ, תַּחַת הָעֵץ.</b></p>
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And this moment, when Abraham looks up to see the mountain on which he will bind his son for sacrifice:

<p><b>Exodus 22</b></p> <p><sup>3</sup> So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day <b>Abraham looked up</b> and saw the place from afar.</p>	<p><b>ג וַיִּשְׂכֶם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר, וַיַּחֲבֹשׂ אֶת-חֲמֹרוֹ, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ, וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ; וַיִּבְקַע, עֵצֵי עֵלֶה, וַיִּקַּם וַיִּלְךְ, אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים</b></p> <p><b>ד בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם--מֵרְחוֹק..</b></p>
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This language also appears in Psalm 121:

<p><b>Psalm 121</b></p> <p><sup>1</sup> A Song of Ascents: I raise my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?</p> <p><sup>2</sup> My help comes from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth.</p>	<p><b>א שִׁיר, לַמַּעֲלוֹת:</b></p> <p><b>אָשָׂא עֵינַי, אֶל-הַהָרִים-- מֵאֵין, יָבֵא עֲזָרִי</b></p> <p><b>ב עֲזָרִי, מֵעַם יְהוָה-- עֲשֵׂה, שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ.</b></p>
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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you make of the similarities in language in the 3 moments Abraham experiences? What is special about these moments in which Abraham “lifts his eyes”? How does this relate to the sentiment expressed in the Psalm?
- (b) What role does God play in these moments? Is Abraham’s raising of his eyes his own choice? Or does it seem inevitable?
- (c) Can you think of a time when you suddenly recognized something important sitting right in front of you? How would you describe that moment? Do you ascribe that discovery to your own choice, or to forces beyond your control?

The sermon juxtaposes Abraham’s reaction when he looks at the charred remains of Sodom and Gomorrah to the moments where he “raises his eyes”:

I just can’t shake the image that Torah paints: . . . He looked down upon Sodom and Gemorah, and he saw, he beheld, the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.

And then silence.

. . .

I think we can feel Abraham’s heart here. Which of us hasn’t looked at something and thought – this is a complete disaster, how will we ever overcome this? I sometimes feel that way about the world these days. About the unrelenting stories of gun violence, about the next African American young woman violently ejected from her classroom, about the only increasing rates of homelessness that we just learned this week. I feel that way reading about Israel right now – a country that I deeply love and as the violence escalates, I feel overwhelmed because I don’t see how we’ll get past this moment. Or . . . pick your poison . . . wouldn’t it be easy to look out over our smoldering cities and behold and stand there like Abraham did?

And yet.

There is a Talmudic term called *ye’ush*<sup>i</sup>. *Ye’ush* means to give up hope. It’s used as a legal category when it comes to returning lost objects. If I lose my prayerbook – which has my name on it – and you find it – halachically, by Jewish law - you have to give it back to me, because I have not experienced *ye’ush* over it – I have a legitimate expectation that I’ll get it back. But if I lose 20 bucks in the streets of NYC and you find it, you can keep it, because I would have no reasonable expectation of ever finding it again. My experience of *ye’ush*, of hopelessness, means that I relinquish my right to that object.

*Ye’ush* is appropriate at times - that’s why there’s a legal category for it. But perhaps Abraham’s actions in this parsha also reveal for us the times in which *ye’ush*, giving up, is not permitted.

See, Abraham eventually leaves that place and by the time we are at the end of this parsha, we find him on top of a different mountain with his son, Isaac. Isaac is tied up and Abraham is about to sacrifice him, just as God told him to. But in this moment, Abraham does not wallow in his desperation. We find the same Hebrew words from when he gazed out over the destroyed cities of Sodom and Gemorah. The angel stops Abraham's hand from striking his son and instead of silently looking at this terrible terrible moment, the text says: *vayisa Avraham et einav*, he lifted his eyes. *Vayar v'hinei*—and he saw and he beheld. This time what he sees is the ram in the thicket— an alternative way out of the destruction he nearly wrought, the pain in which he was nearly complicit. But here, instead of looking down *al pnei*, over the cities - *yisa et einav*, he raised his eyes up.

After all of that destruction that he just witnessed, he still had the courage to look for the ram, to believe there was another way, to overcome his feelings of *ye'ush*, of hopelessness. And in doing so, he does not relinquish his rights to changing the situation.

It is human to feel the weight of the world creep into our hearts. But it is also human . . . and divine . . . to look for the ram in the thicket. To raise our eyes even in the face of great overwhelm and creeping despair. To seek out the strategy that will work, to commit to achieving peace, to know that we can heal pervasive suffering and to work for it.

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) When do you resign yourself to loss? And when do you raise your eyes to find the ram in the thicket? Can you think of a time when all seemed lost but you managed to find a way through a difficult situation? What do you think contributed to your ability to “raise your eyes” in this way?

#### VOICES FROM OUR TRADITION:

The Israeli National Anthem is *HaTikva* (“The Hope”). Written before the establishment of the state of Israel, it expresses the Jewish people’s yearning for a return to its ancestral homeland:

*As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning deep in the heart,*

*With eyes turned toward the East, looking toward Zion,*

*Then our hope - the two-thousand-year-old hope - will not be lost:*

*To be a free people in our land,*

*the land of Zion and Jerusalem.*

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What effect do you think it has on the Israeli people to have this “hope” and aspiration enshrined in their national anthem?
- (b) What if you were to recite your greatest aspirations when you woke up every morning? Or created a family “mission statement” that you read and rethought from time to time. Do you think this would affect the likelihood that you would “raise your eyes” to bring your dreams to fruition?
- (c) If this community were to have an anthem, what hopes would you want to see expressed in it?

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<sup>i</sup> See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 21a-b.