

D'var Torah – Vayera 5770

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By tova Stabin

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you for letting me do a d'var tonight.

When I talked about doing a d'var, I picked a date that I thought would work for me schedule-wise and one close to the *yiskor* of my grandmother, so I could honor her. Then, over the high holidays, I was talking with someone who was thinking of doing a d'var and approached it by looking at which parsha was for which week because she wanted to choose one that touched her. Hmmmm, I thought, it didn't occur to me to do that and wondered what I had gotten myself into - what if it's some parsha where it mostly talks about how many bags of grain there is or long list of people begetting each other and it's hard to find what touches me about it.

So, I checked which parsha it was and double checked, and considering potential mix ups, I double checked with both rabbis' that the correct parsha was Vayera. To more than quickly summarize, some of the main events that happen here are the angels telling Abraham and Sarah that Sarah will bear a child, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife, Lot's children getting pregnant by their father, Hagar and Ishmael being "thrown out," and the *akedah* – Abraham being told to sacrifice Isaac. Well, to say the least, this is not a so-called "simple" parsha (assuming any of them are) about sacks of grains where I might have a hard time finding something to say. As my grandmother would say, people plan and G-d laughs and I thought, my grandmother is still being a good teacher for laughter, in all its many manifestations, is to me, one of the important unifying themes in this parsha.

The parsha starts out with the angels in the form of strangers, telling Abraham that Sarah will bear a child and Sarah finds it laughable at her age to have a child. I know this laughter that comes from thinking it's impossible to have a child because I have experienced it myself as the absurdity of lesbians having children. Too many have and still do laugh at the thought of lesbians and other queers having children – couldn't be, how would they do it, they don't deserve to, what kind of parents would they make, and on and on. I certainly bought it – that derisive laughter was so loud in my childhood and young adult ears that I thought it was impossible to have a child and for a long time I didn't even let myself think about having children – it was a laughable idea. Surely, "they" make it hard –

there's not medical coverage, if you're privileged to have it, for alternative insemination, for instance, and adoption laws for LGBT, are at best, difficult. For instance, Anne and I had been together years before we decided to have a child, we went through the whole process together, finding and using an anonymous donor via the services of a friend and yet, we still had to fill out forms, talk with a social worker, and show up in court so Anne could legally adopt Mayim – and this was in Seattle, a place where it was legal and fairly easy to do so as a step-parent adoption. In some ways, we had the last laugh after all because, as anyone who knows our son Mayim, they know we have the best kid ever. Unfortunately, not entirely the last laugh, as we still get remarks from many and messages from the culture at large about our relationship, our so-called life-style and our parenting being a “joke,” and my son has gotten teased and bullied his whole life for the impossibility of having two mothers and no father. I laughed at one remark by a middle school mate who said one of his moms must be a live in nanny, which is a whole other class issue, and, as some of you know, that's what I talked about in a different d'var.

But it really isn't just laughter itself when I think about these issues, but the other sides of laughter. On a panel discussion here a friend of mine talked about how people always remark about her good sense of humor and she said what they often didn't realize, that the other side of her laughter was her rage. So, while I laugh hard like Sarah, I know for Sarah, myself, and many others who experience discrimination or abuse or betrayal, talked about so much in this parsha, it is important to understand these seeming opposites of laughter and rage and their intimate connection. This idea of seeming opposites being intimately woven together is also an important part of this parsha. There is commentary, for instance, about all the times “*min hashamayim*” is said in the parsha, creating an atmosphere where heaven and earth are bridged, where angels are on earth or where Avraham argues with G-d about saving Sodom, for instance, as well as Rashi's commentary on the word *shamayim* – sky –, which he calls a compound of *esh* (fire) and *mayim* (water), where opposites coexisting in the sky so that the heavens are a place of solace and danger, for instance. And this looking at words and names and naming, is also an important part of this parsha, as we see when talking about Sodom and Lot's wife and later Issac, again.

Allowing me to skip over Avraham's argument with G-d to save Sodom if righteous people could be found, we move towards what happens in Sodom when the angels get there. In modern times, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah or

rather the use of the story is no laughing matter for the LGBTQ community, as it has been interpreted by the religious right and others as another place that so-called proves G-d's hatred of homosexuals. When the angels, in the form of "strangers" are in Lot's home, the men of Sodom surround his house demanding he bring out the strangers so that they may "know them." Some of the debate, to my understanding, is how the word know can be used in Hebrew to mean being sexual – as in knowing someone in the biblical sense. So, the men outside Lot's house want to be sexual with the male strangers and they are seen as evil, supposedly because it's men wanting to be sexual with men, but what of that so-called sexual desire? This is not, in my eyes, about men loving other men or even passion or desire. These riotous men's main interest seems to be forcing strangers to have "sex" – if one's to call it that, rather than what I would say was wanting to overpower these strangers and be violent towards them. In my estimation, the men of Sodom want to rape these strangers, which is not about sexual desire. If a main parsha theme is how we treat strangers, starting with how Avraham treats the strangers/the angels who come to his tent, and this concept of treating strangers kindly is an important value to Judaism, why is it that we do not discuss the issue of rape of strangers here rather than so-called homosexuality?

But my rage here increases as I read on and see that Lot, in an effort to protect these strangers, offers instead to these violent rioting men surrounding his home, his "untouched" daughters – Lot says he will bring his daughters out to the men, if only they leave the strangers alone. How is it that there is often talk about the evils of homosexuality here, but not of a father who offers his "untouched" daughters to a mob of violent men who are wanting to rape? In the end, the Angels intervene, and tell Lot they are going to destroy the city and that he and his family must leave. Lot lingers in the morning when he must leave, but the angels safely put him and his family outside the city with the warning that they are not to look back at the city being destroyed.

And here is where we find the story of Lot's wife. As is known by many an intrigued school child, as I was, Lot's wife looks back and turns into a pillar of salt. On the surface, we know she was told to not look back and disobeyed and was punished, but if we look deeper, what can we make of her turning into a pillar of salt? What can we make of a woman, despite all the press she gets, who is so identity-less that she isn't even known as "Mrs. Lot" but rather Lot's wife? Perhaps, this woman without an identity did not have the strength of Sarah - Lot's wife was unable to laugh at the absurdity of her life, to do something about the

rage she might have had over her husband who in a so-called attempt to be righteous “offered” their untouched daughters to a riotous mob. Perhaps, she looked back and remembered the betrayal of her husband and the fear and rage she felt at how her daughters might have been used and she felt powerless to do anything about it. Perhaps without the laughter, without the outlet for her rage, with only the silence of a woman condemned to be without a name, she was consumed by her rage and her grief; perhaps she feared looking forward towards an unknown scary powerless future and could not get over her grief when looking at the past, perhaps her identity become ONLY her grief and the salt of her tears became all that she was, so she turned into only her tears, a pillar of salty grief without a form or a name.

Have we not felt that as women, as LGBTQ, as Jews, as “others” in a culture, where we are, at times, seen only as an “other,” in relationship to those more powerful, that we cannot find laughter as an outlet for our rage and we feel overwhelmed with our grief; that if we look back at our life, at what was thought to be home or safety, at our past, at what was done to us or our children, we sometimes feel nothing more than our grief and tears, as if we might become a pillar of salt? I have felt that at times – that I might turn into a pillar of salt.

Grief and rage and laughter continue to be found in the parsha – such as the story when Avraham moves to Gerar, says Sarah is his sister and negotiates water rights, of Hagar and Sarah, as well as more on Lot and his daughters, but I’m glad for the cleverness of the Jews to come back to the same stories each year, because knowing how much we can talk sometimes, it’s good to know you don’t have to deal with the whole story in one sitting or we’d be here quite some time. So I want to continue towards another important piece of the story, nearly the end of this parsha, the *akedah*, where G-d asks Avraham to sacrifice his son, Issac.

Unlike Lot’s wife, Issac’s name has significance. Because of Sarah laughing when told she would bare a child, Issac or *Yitzchak*, so named because it comes from the root for the word to laugh, I have a strong belief in the sacredness of naming. It seems to me just as Lot’s wife not having a name impacts her, Issac’s name is essential to who he is. Issac, with seeming abandon and trust, goes with his father to the hills where eventually Avraham ties Issac up and lifts his knife to sacrifice him and, just in the nick of time an angel stops him from doing so. How much rage though could Issac have felt when Avraham tied him up and lifted the knife towards him (and later Sarah when she hears of the story, though not talked about). What survival mechanism could Issac need to get through this betrayal by

his father – his very soul, his very name – to laugh – would need to encompass a mechanism to deal with his rage? One of the bitter ironies of children being abused by family members is that the children don't necessarily recognize at the time that what is happening to them is abuse – the world they know to trust, like Issac trusts his father and Avraham trusts "G-d," is that of their family; betrayal may sometimes, not always, feel wrong in their gut, but they still love and are dependent on those who betray them and generally, abusers, are not all evil. The world of abuse and love, like other issues in this parsha, are seemingly opposites that are intimately connected. However, abuse mixed with love is often the only experience that abused children know – abuse and love are the same, not opposites. Sometimes if that recognition of abuse does not happen, it can, I believe, make the cycle of abuse continue, as the abuse is seen as "the way it is," normal life. It is when one gets to name the abuse and be able to have both the rage and the laughter, that healing can come. Perhaps Sarah and Issac needed laughter deep in their soul, in their name and ability to name, to deal with the tests they were asked to endure, just as Avraham went through many tests in this parsha.

When I thought about how to come to a conclusion here, I thought it be appropriate to end with a joke, so a rabbi, a priest, and a preacher walk into a bar... no, I'm only kidding because each of us has to define and name our individual and collective laughter and rage, understanding how to best react to those around us who laugh at us and finding our own ways to laugh and address our rage at an unjust, absurd, challenging and often unexplainable world, as Sarah and Issac did. And we need to name these things out loud to ourselves and each other, learning how to acknowledge and move on from the past and look towards the future in a way Lot's wife could not, for as Lot's wife exemplifies, without a name and an identity our soul and our communities can be overwhelmed by our grief.

So, while this d'var wasn't really funny, I often do get my best laughs with others who are dealing with their rage and find it an amazing and necessary mitzvah to laugh with others at the absurdity of the world and our lives – I believe it is essential to the Jewish soul and tradition, and essential to dealing with our past and our ability to survive into the future. Thank you and Shabbat shalom.

