

In my tradition, the ancestor Abraham is considered the “first Jew,” credited with discovering the oneness of God. In Genesis, Chapter 12, this moment is captured in the call he receives: “Go forth, from your land, from your birthplace, from your ancestral home, to a land that I will show you.”

What is it in Abraham that merits him to receive this call? There is a *midrash*, an extrabiblical commentary, about this moment that I love. *Genesis Rabbah*, Chapter 39, opens with a discussion of the question:

Hashem said to Avram, "Go you forth from your land..." ... Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a castle that was *doleket* - which can be translated as either aglow, full of light, or “in flames.” He said, "Could it be said that this castle has no one running it!?" The owner of the castle peeked out and said, “I am the master of the castle.” Similarly, because Abraham our father said, “Could it be said that this world has no one running it?”, the Holy Blessed One looked out and said to him, “I am the Master of the Universe.” ... Thus, God said to Avram, Go forth. . .

Abraham, according to this midrash, merits the call not through blind faith, but by witnessing something and asking an audacious question.

Now, the question itself can be understood in two different ways, really hinging on how one translates the word *doleket*. If we translate this word to mean aglow - the traveler sees a glowing castle - then the traveler’s question is one of appreciation: “Can it be that there is no master here?” Meaning: how could anyone say such a beautiful castle is not being running by some highly intelligent will?! And the master responds by saying, “Right you are! You got it! Here I am.”

If we translate *doleket* as “in flames,” which is in fact a slightly more accurate literal translation, then the meaning of the whole *midrash* is different. Then the traveler’s question is one of horror, or at the very least indignation: “How can it be that no one is keeping this castle from going up in flames?! Can it be that there is no master?” And the master, peeking out, is saying, “hard as it is to be believe, I am in fact in here.” Or even perhaps, ‘Here I am! Help! Get me out!”

And so it was that Abraham witnesses the realities of the world: either the glory, or the horror - or more likely, both the glory of the glowing world and the horror of the burning world - and says, “Could it be that there is no master?”

And is answered with a glimpse of God.

And is answered with the call to reject what he knows and begin on a journey.

This midrash touches on some deep, important questions about what it means to be a faithful person. It heartens me as it reminds me that awe and submission are not the only doorways to divine encounter.

Abraham’s indignant voice, saying “if someone is in charge, how can this possibly be happening?” is also an act of religious significance, an act that leads, in this midrash, to grace, to God’s spontaneous self-revelation. As someone who finds myself simmering with indignation about the state of the world on a fairly constant basis, I want to explore how this holy audacity can actually bolster our faith and inspire us today.

The world is in fact burning. Yearly average temperatures are climbing, and that takes its cost in human life and the health of creation. We all know the news of the increasing rate of species extinction. We have all seen the photos and articles about refugees washing up on the shores of Europe, victims directly or indirectly of droughts caused by climate change.

Our country's government and multinational corporations are eagerly feeding the fire, rushing literally to dig up more fuel wherever it can be found. Our culture is fully committed to the perpetuation of the story that Naomi Klein describes so eloquently in the book *This Changes Everything*, the story that infinite growth is possible on a finite planet.

For centuries, the countries and corporations that held power have been willing to tell that story, and turn resources in far off places and someone else's labor into money and prosperity at home. As dissident economist Charles Eisenstein writes in *Sacred Economics*:

I can find a traditional society that uses herbs and shamanic techniques for healing, destroy their culture and make them dependent on pharmaceutical medicine that they must purchase, evict them from their land so they cannot be subsistence farmers and must buy food, and clear the land and hire them on a banana plantation - and I have made the world richer. I have brought various functions, relationships, and natural resources into the realm of money. (Chapter 5)

In Naomi Klein's language, the culture that Charles Eisenstein describes would be a "sacrifice zone." Today this story is still enacted, but as we run out of distant sacrifice zones, some of us are beginning to notice that it is killing us. We cannot keep the damage at a distance anymore; it is washing up on our shores.

When oil trains derail and ignite towns in our home state, or our own crops fail because of the unpredictable weather patterns, we take notice. We can be numb while monetizing other cultures to grow our economies, but when our own homes become the sacrifice zones, we ask, like Abraham, *“How can this possibly be happening?”* We cannot ignore the fallacy that our economy is based on.

---

I think it is particularly telling that Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all within their sacred texts, prohibit and condemn the practice known as usury. In fact, when I say that word, we all probably have negative connotations, so universally is it condemned. Usury is the practice of people who have more than enough extracting yet more from others, who are in need, by charging them a delayed, future price to be paid for money used now.

That, however, is simply the practice of lending at interest, so ubiquitous today that the global economy is entirely built on it. The economy as it is currently structured demands that individuals and entire nations continuously accumulate debt, repay it and take out more debt. This continuous process is what generates economic growth. Hypothetically, people are supposed to generate money at a higher rate than they need to repay their debts - but this is in fact that same myth of infinite growth in a finite system, appearing in the form of economic theory, and that fallacy leads to the numerous bubbles and crashes that rock us periodically. This system in the long term serves to cause a flow of wealth from people who have little to people who already have a great deal.

As for individuals, so too for nations. This system is one of reasons that we are still digging fossil fuels out of the earth, even in places where the entire populace is united in opposition - because, when communities do not have the

money to pay off their debts, the global economy imposes austerity upon them and demands that they monetize their resources: their water, the treasures below the ground and their labor. Again, from Charles Eisenstein:

Debt forces nations and individuals to devote their productivity toward money. Individuals compromise their dreams and work at jobs to keep up with their debts. Nations convert subsistence agriculture and local self-sufficiency, which do not generate foreign exchange, into export commodity crops and sweatshop production, which do. Haiti has been in debt since 1825, when it was forced to compensate France for the property (i.e., slaves) lost in the slave revolt of 1804. When will it pay off its debt? Never. (Chapter 5)

Pretty galling, isn't it, that our economic logic has Haiti impoverished to continue to pay down its liberty, when moral logic would demand that France be paying off a debt to Haiti for the exploited resources and labor? *How can this possibly be happening?* This inverted logic is enacted all over the world as the most powerful countries exploit the labor and resources of other nations, and enforce debts claims upon them to continue to exploit them.

Thus in a world of abundant natural resources, usury creates a system in which no one has enough, ever. That is why usury - so ubiquitous, so universally condemned by all religious traditions - is so intimately tied up in the fire that consumes us.

---

Our ancient traditions understood something about the nature of the world that our economists seem to have forgotten. The laws that prevent the charging of interest on loans are born of an understanding that most currencies are not, in themselves, intrinsically valuable. If one person's farm goes under, we all have

less to eat, even if some of us have more money. It's an easy thing to understand in a small village, a more difficult thing to understand in a global village - but religion can give us that larger perspective.

Though the ancient traditions steer us towards an understanding of the interconnectedness of creation, today it is not inevitable that religion act as a steadfast moral voice to temper the demands of a cultural system that is destroying creation. Too often, we have seen the language of religion co-opted by the very trends it seeks to fight.

From the time the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, that tradition, originally founded in a moral stance against the excesses of empire, has frequently served the higher demands of capitalism, rather than demanding that capitalism, in turn, serve the demands of the sacred. In 1610, a Catholic priest in America wrote to a Church father in Portugal asking about the morality of the transatlantic slave trade. The Church father affirmed that it was morally legitimate; "therefore," he wrote, "we and the fathers of Brazil buy these slaves for our service without any scruple." Christian doctrine was, and still is, used to drive the displacement and enslavement of indigenous people all over the world.

It is particularly easy to note how the Christian tradition has served imperial, worldly concerns because that is the tradition that is allied with empire in America, but I do not intend an indictment uniquely against Christianity. When any religion allies itself with an empire whose goals include infinite growth, the sacred is desecrated. None of our traditions are inherently destructive, but when the goal of growth and conquest meets and embraces a religious truth claim, violence becomes a likely possibility.

There is further space for turning religion to justify setting our world on fire. In their exclusive truth claims, many religions allow their adherents to designate whole communities as other, as lesser. To go back to my earlier example of the Biblical mandate against usury, while the law is very firm about how generous we are to be with our neighbor, I know at least in the case of Judaism and Christianity, the prohibition against usury only applies to the neighbor and the kin. The Torah commands me not to loan money at interest to anyone within my culture - we have a reciprocal fellowship - but the Torah permits me to charge interest to those beyond my culture (and them to charge interest to me). The same is true for earlier versions of Christianity, which is incidentally the root of the stereotype of the Jewish moneylender in medieval Christian Europe.

In our increasingly interconnected world, the reality of who is our neighbor - upon whose well-being my own well-being depends - is turning out to be different from how our ancestors understood that reality. What do we do with this knowledge?

---

In other words, what are we to do in this burning world? One answer that is gaining traction, as evidenced by the rise and increasingly vocal stance of the alt-right, is that we hunker down. We make sure that there will be enough for us and for ours - enough land, enough weapons, enough money. We take what we can get while we can get it, and we build strong enough walls to keep everyone else out, making sure that we will have the last clean water, the last can of food, the last medicine, or at least, the money to buy it and a gun to defend it. We see the news of others who do not have what we have, and we bolster ourselves with the

narrative that *those others* are - fill-in the blank: lazy, primitive, weak, inherently violent. There are many adjectives we can use about *them* to absolve ourselves as we hunker down over the hoard we've accumulated.

This is a very human impulse towards survival. And we can deploy religion to support it. After all, our holy texts tell us to take care of our own. Our holy texts tell us that others are condemned, and that it is God's will.

Or we can let religion inspire us in a different direction.

The Hebrew Bible demands that we have awareness of when we have enough. For example, Deuteronomy 8:10 commands, "When you have eaten and are satisfied, you must bless your God. . ." In today's culture, defining enough is a powerful choice.

My husband and I have a practice. In addition to saying a traditional blessing after all of our meals, we strive to keep a sense of enough in our lives on a larger scale. We have made a list, titled, "the definition of 'enough'," and every few months, we check in with our lives in relation to that list. We list what is enough in many categories: size of house, number of dollars saved, number jars of tomatoes canned for the year, number of children we hope to have someday. We strive to define enough for ourselves so that we can guard against slipping into excess.

Excess is dangerous partly because it is so universally recognized as a marker of success in our culture. The lack of distinction between "enough" and "as much as possible" is one of the hallmarks of our infinite growth mentality. If that assumed equivalence goes unchallenged, it is very easy to slip into another fallacy of moral equivalence, a fallacy in which we all participate. If it is moral to try to acquire as much as possible, it becomes difficult to recognize the thefts



occurring all the time, as wealth is wrested - whether resources or labor - from individuals and communities who have not enough and accrued to those who already have plenty.

One of the tasks that faces us now, as individuals, and in community, is to maintain rigorous and healthy conversation about what is enough - whether enough shoes in my closet, enough members of the synagogue, enough lanes on our highways, or high enough profit margins for multi-national corporations.

And what about usury? If we were to assume a commitment against usury, and to choose to extend that commitment to all of our fellow humans, this would require a radical shift in our lives. The stock market, based on an assumption of continued growth, would be off-limits; so, in fact, would bank accounts that earn even small amounts of interest. Many of us, including myself, are not prepared to divest from our current world system so completely.

But there are cultural steps we can take. Whether it's free-loan societies, which have existed for centuries in Jewish communities, web-platforms like Kindista, which work to create a gift economy, or the emerging strike debt movement, there are growing possibilities for demonetizing our communities and our interactions, for investing in what will nourish us all, rather than in the usury economy that demands the devouring of each other and the world. To seek alternatives to usury is to seek an alternative story to the one of infinite growth that our dominant culture demands. We could draw on our religious concepts, like the Biblical idea of Shmita: the sabbatical every seventh year, when debts are

forgiven and the land is allowed to rest; in short; when growth is literally paused, “so that the poor of the land may eat,” as it says in Leviticus 25.

This consciousness can be present in our conversations about how we relate to our urban growth boundary, and plan for sustainable development and absorption of a growing population in Lane County. It can be present in decision-making about disaster preparedness: who gets to be part of the conversation, and what tasks get delegated to business, to the city, to volunteers. It can be present in the ways we take accountability for absorbing refugees from the regions across the world where our culture’s economic demands have created the instability that leads to displacement, and in the other ways that we commit to accountability for our non-monetary and often unacknowledged debts to historically exploited populations. And to build the practice in our lives, we can take on individual acts of abundance, whether by sharing our garden’s produce, or sharing freely of our time and skills to help our neighbors.

We have a choice: hoarding, or relating. Our religious teachings will be used to justify either. Which we will choose?