

"Expectation and Reality - Reflection on Genesis 21:1 and Promise"

At family meals and holiday gatherings we often share memories, stories of what our families were like in previous generations. And in *our* house it was the same way. At meals and gatherings the conversation somehow always shifted for at least part of the time to the way things used to be, the way the family would come together when they spent time each summer up in the mountains, in the Catskills.

I always liked to hear about these vacations and I often pictured myself up there, swimming in a lake, hearing a great comedian, and maybe taking a mambo lesson—the simple pleasures of time with extended family all together in one beautiful place during the summer. I hoped and expected that some of the joy my parents' generation had experienced could still be there for my generation and future generations.

Last year, Rachel and Dara and I were driving south from the Finger Lakes Region, and I missed the turn off for the New York State Thruway. Instead, we ended up on Rt. 17, and as we continued south on 17 we passed the Red Apple Rest, the one place where everyone used to stop on their way up to the Catskill Mountains. It had already been closed and condemned in September of 2006. (Pause) While I was happy to see this place where my family had visited, the empty parking lot was a sign that my hopes and expectations for a re-creation of the past would not, at least not fully, translate into reality. My expectations may have been too high. Perhaps it is too much to hope for that we can recreate the past in the present.

When we think about our own expectations and hopes, expectations for what we can do, and expectations of ourselves, we find that sometimes we do try and achieve more than is possible or probable. And sometimes we set our expectations too low. And we either feel content to have done *something* or we feel that something is missing in our lives.

All our hopes, all our expectations motivate us to live in a certain way. When our expectations (gesture) are low, perhaps it *is* easier to meet them, but not as satisfying in the end. When our expectations are high, it is more difficult to meet them, but the sense of accomplishment we feel when reach or surpass them can be amazing.

Confronting our expectations of ourselves, and our community, is part of preparing for the New Year. Through our prayers and our time for reflection, we have the opportunity to clarify what we hope to achieve in the New Year. (Slow) And though we know

that we may not always reach our goals, we must not give up. Instead, we must find the confidence within ourselves to move forward with every intention of achieving what we set out to do, of making our hopes and dreams into reality. And in the most difficult times we can do our best to make it through with dignity and integrity.

These lessons and more can be found in the letter and spirit of today's reading from the Torah. We can learn about the dynamics of our lives and hopes from the story of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah heard from angels some time ago that they would have a child of their own, an heir. And now God fulfills the promise. Va'do—nai pakad et Sarah ka'asher amar, va'yas Ado—nai le'Sarah ka'asher dee'bear. God remembered Sarah as God had said, God did for Sarah as God had spoken. And our tradition teaches us that it was on Rosh Hashanah that God began to fulfill this promise. (B. RH 10b) And so today is an important day to explore the way that Abraham and Sarah received God's promise—for in their reactions to the promise, we can find the two ways that we as human beings approach our expectations, hopes, and dreams for the future.

God set them up with *high expectations*, or Great Expectations as Charles Dickens might say, and in their old age both Sarah and Abraham laughed when they heard God's promise. Abraham laughed first. The classic Jewish commentaries suggest that Abraham laughed out of joy of the news. How can we tell the emotion is joy? First, God does not rebuke Abraham for his laughter. Second, the Maskil David suggests that God would not tell Abraham to name the child Isaac/Yitzchak, meaning laughter, if Abraham's laughter was not out of joy.

According to the commentaries, Sarah's laughter came from a different motivation. They suggest that she was hesitant, dubious about God's promise. She said to herself, "After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure for me?" In response, God becomes angry, saying, "Why does Sarah laugh and say: Shall I really give birth now that I am old?" God did not punish Sarah for her disbelief, God simply reminded her that for God nothing is impossible even if it might appear impossible for human beings. Sarah reacted from a real place of wonder and surprise since she was far past her childbearing years.

We can take a lesson though from the distinction that our tradition offers us between the two responses.

The reaction of Abraham is the celebration of what is possible despite the odds, despite our doubts. When we think in the spirit of Abraham, anything and everything is possible no matter how difficult it may seem. The reaction of Sarah is a check and

balance to the spirit of Abraham. The spirit of Sarah helps us to take things slowly, to ask ourselves the questions we need to ask before pursuing our objectives. The spirit of Sarah does not deny that anything is possible, but it does require us to make sure that we use our energy and inspiration wisely. The reality is that both reactions are healthy and both reactions are necessary.

Over the centuries, Jews have expressed Abraham's spirit in different ways. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, a leader among the people during the uprising against Rome, faced an uncertain future for the Jewish people with the Romans under Vespasian laying siege to Jerusalem. He escaped Jerusalem hidden in a coffin, pretending to be dead, and when the coffin was brought before Vespasian he came out and made the prophecy that Vespasian would be emperor, and in the same breath he requested that he could set up a new academy for students of Torah at Yavneh, west of Jerusalem. Vespasian did become emperor and Jewish learning continued at Yavneh and beyond. Ben Zakkai rejected those who would have fought to the last man standing so that Jewish life and learning could continue. He had high expectations for the Jewish future, and the loss of the Temple did not deter him from making sure that the Torah would live on and that the Jewish mind would grow and develop into the future even if another people ruled over the Holy Land. Theodor Herzl expressed a similar idea in his book *Altneuland*, *Old, New Land* published in 1902, an idea we still often hear in Israel, *Im tirtzu, ein zo agadah*. If you will it, it is no dream. He wrote this with the hope that the collective power of the Jewish people would eventually lead to the formation of a new Jewish State. This spirit lives on.

I see the spirit of Yochanan ben Zakkai and Herzl in our students who today read from the Torah and who fill our classrooms and halls with their voices, ideas, and presence. I see this spirit in the way that we live and plan for the future through good times and bad.

Jews have expressed Sarah's spirit as well. We have asked ourselves the difficult questions and confronted the harsher realities of our world in different ways. The great Rabbi Hillel, one of the early Rabbinic leaders, taught us the lesson: Do not be sure of yourself until the day of your death, do not judge your fellow human being until you stand in her situation. (Avot 2:4) Hillel teaches us not to get so comfortable that we avoid looking inward and judging ourselves. And Hillel teaches us that we must always look for new perspectives on our lives, that our own eyes can fool us if we are not careful and that it is easier to see someone else's faults than our own. This is the spirit of Sarah, the sensitivity that we must have in order to make our hopes and dreams possible in this world.

The brave Jewish soldier Hannah Senesh who parachuted into Nazi Europe during World War II wrote a poem that we will see in the spirit of Sarah, "Eli, Eli, shelo yigamer le'olam, ha'chol ve'ha'yam, rishrush shel hamayim, barak hashamayim tefilat ha'Adam." "My God, My God, may these things never end, the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens, the prayers of humanity." She wrote these lines about taking a walk along the beach in the city of Kaysaria/Ceaseria in Israel. She expresses in these words the spirit of Sarah with a plea from her soul that the simple and beautiful things in this world will always be with us, with the implication that other things, what we possess, what we plan, what we work for, that these things may not happen for us, they may not endure. So, we can be hopeful in the spirit of Abraham, but we also must be careful not to allow the world to become only an unbridled dream in the Spirit of Abraham. We cannot allow our hopes or the comfort we feel in our everyday lives to blind us to the realities of the world around us. We have to think carefully and be honest with others and ourselves. Sarah's reaction to God was honest, sincere, we've laughed that way too.

It is through a balancing act, taking the lessons that our tradition ascribes to (gesture Left/Right/center) Abraham and the lessons ascribed to Sarah together that will give us guidance into this New Year.

We cannot live only in the extremities of total confidence like Abraham and in the inward search for questions and answers like Sarah. We have to sample from both worlds of thought, seeking balance, seeking the integration of these two mindsets. We can take comfort in the way our tradition takes into account the spirit of Abraham and the spirit of Sarah and teaches us to consider ourselves *balanced in the first place*. The Rabbis of the Talmud taught: A person should always regard him or herself as half guilty and half meritorious. If he or she performs one good deed, one is happy for adding weight to the scale of merit. If he or she commits one transgression, woe to the one for being weighed down in the scale of guilt...(Kiddushin 40)

Our world is like the scales of justice that God oversees, that God pays close attention to at this time of year. And we exist in this world with all the emotions, hopes, expectations, and doubts that flow out of the experiences that we have everyday, that flow from our dreams of who we can be and what we hope to do.

(Energy!) When we celebrate what is possible without doubts and uncertainties, we feel a sense of excitement, whether our expectations are realistic or not. In this New Year, we need to allow ourselves to feel this way, to dream a little bigger and wider than we might usually dream.

When we slow ourselves down and ask the questions that are important to ask in the spirit of Sarah, when we take a careful look at the reality of our situation and the decisions we must make, we may feel a sense of loss. We live in world in which communication and results are expected instantly. We have less patience and more to think about than ever before, and so we have less tolerance for delay. A careful process of thinking and planning requires us to give up the sense that we can even tackle all the problems before us, all at once. There is nothing wrong with the kind of enthusiasm Abraham demonstrated, but through reflection, we may even realize that we should use our energy elsewhere or find a different approach altogether to solving a problem. The time we sacrifice, the energy we use up in the thinking and reflection—the loss we feel-- will be tempered by how helpful it can be to think carefully, to plan realistically and use our best judgment.

We read (past tense) today about the way that God fulfilled God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. We learn from this story that Abraham and Sarah reacted differently to the initial report that they would finally have a son, an heir, in the first place. And these reactions are important. They remind us that our ancestors were human beings like us and that the Torah teaches us about the human condition, about how we stand before our expectations of ourselves and on the one hand feel the great hope and potential, and on the other hand ask ourselves how we will achieve all that we hope for.

And their story reminds us that Abraham and Sarah were human beings, like us, although God made a promise and set an expectation for them, they could not know all that the future would hold for them and for their son to be named Isaac. For them, and for us, each New Year is not a story already written, but a story that is still unfolding.

Shana tovah u'metukah, I want to wish everyone a good and sweet New Year in which all our dreams come closer to reality.