

## **Rosh Hashanah Day 1**

### **The Burning Castle**

*Once upon a time a traveller was making his way through the desert. He had been traveling so long that he had forgotten the place his journey had begun and he did not yet know the place where it would end. He had become expert in journeying: packing up his things, putting one foot in front of the other from sunrise to sunset, pausing only to find food and water where he could; then making camp for the night and wrapping himself up against the cold to fall asleep, only to awaken the next morning and begin the process all over again.*

*But one day, things changed.*

*From far away, the traveller saw a light - a strange light, not sunlight, because it was too close to the ground. From the source of the light - yellow, orange, red - rose a plume of dark smoke that spread itself steadily across the clarity of the sky.*

*And as the traveller came closer, he discovered the source of the light. It was a castle, all on fire. Flames poured from the empty window spaces, leaving trails of soot on the stone. The roof, which must have originally been made of wood, had burned away completely, with only a few charred beams left to show it had ever been there, and more flames danced in the crucible left behind.*

*"Surely," thought the traveller, "this castle must have a master!"*

*And into his head, as immediate and present as his own internal voice, though he knew it was not, came the answer: "I am the master of the castle."*

This story begs two questions. One is obvious and the other is less so.

The first question is: what, or who, is the story about? And on the face of it, the answer is a straightforward one. This is a Midrash - an ancient parable - about the early life of Abraham, the lead male character and protagonist in both of the Rosh Hashanah Torah readings. It is normally brought to explain the years of his life that the Torah does not tell us about - he springs into the scroll fully formed, ready to answer the call to go to an unknown place. This story is one of many that try to fill in the blank, to show how Abram - as he was then known - already

had the potential to be Abraham, God's beloved, the one we point to as being the first patriarch of the Jewish people. On a simple level it is a story about how he discovered the existence of God in the universe.

But the story is anything but simple. And that brings me to the second, more complex question. A traveler witnesses a disaster - a castle, that is supposed to represent security and safety, going up in flames. The traveler wonders - how can it be that nobody is in charge of this castle? The master speaks: "I am in charge" - and then seems, unaccountably, to vanish.

Here's the question:

*If the master is really in charge, why doesn't the master just put out the fire?!*

The answer must be that this Midrash is not really about the master. Indeed, the master feels frustratingly like a bit part, an extra - almost-but-not-quite-absent, tantalizingly peeping out and then disappearing.

So it must be the case that the story is about the human being we have been able to see from the outset: the traveler. As the narrative closes in all its ambiguity, as the scene fades, we can imagine the camera closing in on the traveler's face and the expression it bears in response to the master's statement - and perhaps also in response to the master's apparent inability to extinguish the flames.

While this is a Midrash about Abraham, I also believe that such stories were created for us to write ourselves into them. In the character of the traveler-who-is-Abraham we can see ourselves. Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden; Noah's generation was all but wiped out by the flood; but with Abraham and his travels our own story truly began. Those who join the Jewish people by choice are named for him and Sarah, his wife. He is our template, our example, our first real ancestor. In his heroism, in his personal life, in his challenges and his choices, in his errors and his successes, we learn about ourselves.

So: let us go with the idea that we are the traveler.

And we do not have to look far for the castle. It is on fire everywhere we turn.

Last year I stood here and spoke about Charlottesville; this year has seen many more explosions of hatred and extremity. All around us circumstances have become more extreme and demanding; relationships on which the world order used to depend have shown themselves to be brittle; there seems to be an epidemic of dishonesty and dishonor. Any moral compass seems to have disappeared, and it makes us jumpy. And we feel disillusioned or disappointed; we may be dismayed at the way we feel everything is heading; we may feel overwhelmed at how we got to this point or bewildered as to how we are ever supposed to get back to what feels safe, or normal.

We are the traveler watching the castle burn.

On this Rosh Hashanah, on this day that is so full of potential, what can we learn from our ancestor who did the same?

The genius of the Midrash is that it is not specific about what happened after the master speaks. Abraham doesn't run to fetch the Biblical equivalent of the fire department; he doesn't pray for a convenient rainstorm; he doesn't suddenly develop a hosepipe for a nose. All of those would satisfy our need for easy answers and happy endings, but their very absence implies that this mysteriously burning castle signifies something that is more complex, and less amenable to a quick fix. Our lives in the presence of burning castles are like this too, and simple answers are thin on the ground.

But if we put our minds to it, we can still begin to deduce how Abraham might have found meaning in the flames. Let me offer us some possibilities.

The first one is the idea of mobility. Castles don't move. The master of the castle seems, inexplicably, to be trapped in it as well. But the traveler has actual mastery of the situation in terms of perspective. And perspective implies flexibility. We can imagine Abraham walking around the castle, pondering it, ultimately deciding whether to stand and watch it burn, to walk away or to do something else. None of the other protagonists have this power.

The second is the idea of challenge or contentiousness. Abraham does not accept the situation with which he is presented. Theoretically he could have thrown up his hands - "This castle is burning and I can't stop it," or just walked away. He

does neither: he stops and begins to question the situation. He won't just put up with the status quo.

And for the third possibility we have to look at this Midrash in the wider context of what happened afterwards. Abraham saw the burning castle; and then he went on to become Abraham. This episode must have played some role in his development. He must have internalized it in some way that helped him become our first ancestor. I suggest he realized that he did not have to be passive. Even if he did nothing but bear witness to the chaos, he was important to the story.

All three of these possibilities add up to the idea that even when castles are burning, we - Abraham's descendants - are still free.

We are free to expand our perspectives

We are free not to take the world around us at its face value.

We are free to question

We are free to plan our next steps.

And each of these actions changes our own relationship with the castle, the master and the flames.

The Torah readings for today and tomorrow are a record of the times that Abraham forgot his mobility, his perspective and his capacity to grow. In both of them he is passive. And so they represent his two greatest mistakes, his two signal failures. Perhaps this is the reason we read them on Rosh Hashanah - to remind us that even the greatest of us can fail, but can always begin again. None of us is immune to extreme circumstances.

But if the failing Abraham is within us, so is the traveler at the burning castle. And this year, if the master cannot put out the flames, then each of us must help the master to do so.

Let us resolve, this year, to call on all the positive qualities of our traveling ancestor. Let us remember, when we feel stuck and overwhelmed, that it is possible still to move. Let us not forget, when we are bombarded by a single viewpoint, that we can always change our perspective. And when we are presented with absolutes - absolute chaos, absolute incredulity, absolute despair, let us find within ourselves the challenger and the questioner, ready to fill us with courage and, if necessary, defiance.

And let us learn from the burning castle, in the hope that perhaps by doing so, we can be part of creating a reality in which the flames might not burn so brightly.

Shanah tovah.