

Over the years—over the many, many years—commentators both wise and not so wise have been challenged to understand the deeper meanings of this story we have just read about Abraham and Isaac up on the mountain. Among the wise ones, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides: all the great sages have expressed their ideas. And among those who are somewhat less wise are people just like us, and we, too, are entitled to our opinions. We have listened to this story year-by-year, first as children, then as adults; as parents, then as grandparents; as proteges, as teachers, as mentors; as idealists and realists; as romantics and skeptics; as people full of deep faith and as people overwhelmed by doubt. This morning I would like to share with you some ideas about this story that are new to me, though surely not new in the long history of Torah commentary. But for me these are ideas that would never have occurred to me until the past few years.

In this view, new to me, Abraham is not a towering spiritual giant at the beginning of his journey through life, but only toward its end. At the beginning, he is much the same as any of us. He is a person who has experienced a spiritual awakening, and he is trying, throughout **his** many years, to **stay** awake and to integrate this awakening into his life. The **kind** of spiritual awakening he experienced was no different than that which many of us experience, perhaps all of us. We are not talking about Moses at the burning bush, or Paul on the road to Damascus, or Muhammad in the mountains outside of Mecca. We are talking about a kind of spiritual awakening that I know we can all experience—momentary glimmers of oneness with the universe, glimmers of abundance and wholeness, moments precisely of peace. Sometimes we think of these glimmers as "mountain-top

moments," these stirrings of profound emotion and energy that can overtake us in beautiful places or in emotionally dramatic circumstance. But almost by definition, these moments are fleeting. Their effects may linger with us for a few hours or a few days, but too soon we sink back into our normal selves, and the moments themselves come to feel almost as if they had never happened.

Sometimes, however, as in the case of Abraham, these awakenings are more energizing and long-lasting. Maybe they begin in the exact same way, as "mountain-top moments," but they don't fade away as quickly. Or perhaps we don't **allow** them to fade away as quickly. We work to prolong and repeat them. Feeling a new, subtle energy infusing us, sometimes we change our behavior as we try to prolong and repeat these moments.

Sometimes we change the very course of our lives in an effort to **stay** awakened, to keep this new energy flowing.

Perhaps this is why you joined a synagogue after many years away from Judaism—you hoped that Jewish learning, Jewish prayer, Jewish communal life would help you stay awakened after one of your “mountain-top moments.” Perhaps this is why you committed to a program of regular private prayer or meditation. Perhaps this is why you practice yoga. Perhaps this is why you create music and art, to express and prolong the feelings of unity and peace that these moments bring with them.

Abraham, our patriarch, he felt his “mountain-top moments” so profoundly that he left his homeland and traveled toward a place he did not know. Why? Because he knew for himself that to stay

home would be to fall back asleep. If and when we, like Abraham, are moved to change our lives, even a little bit, so that we can more reliably sense that glimmer, then we are really in the same place as Abraham, trying to **remain** awakened and aware of our intuition of wholeness, of completeness, of unity.

Now I grant you that Abraham's awakening was probably more powerful than that which most of us experience, but I firmly believe that it was not different in kind. The greatest difference between Abraham and us is not in the nature of the original awakening, but in the effort we put into staying awake. Abraham chose, deliberately, to keep his flame turned up high. He followed his flame down to Egypt, twice, in times of famine. He tried to save Sodom and Gomorrah to keep alive the glimmers in his heart, and in the hearts of the mere handful of righteous

people who lived in those cities. He abandoned in the desert his consort, Hagar, and his son, Ishmael, because the discord that was created by their presence in his household threatened to extinguish his glimmering flame. His actions in this regard, and in certain others, may have been dishonorable, but it is crucial that we understand his motives—to keep alive the glimmer of his spiritual awakening, and to extend his enlightenment to others.

Abraham had a deep, almost desperate need to remain awake in his glimmer, indeed to grow that glimmer into a **conflagration**.

This need is what drive him up the mountain with Isaac by his side. And there on the mountain, with Isaac by his side, Abraham learned something else that perhaps comes easier to most of **us** than it did to him: that we are not, in this life, meant to burn ourselves up in the flame. We are not meant or required or

expected to immolate ourselves or our children in raging fires of holiness. Rather, we are meant to tend to our flames, remain aware of our glimmers, help others see glimmers of their own.

Abraham passed God's test and became our patriarch not because some angel up in heaven yelled at him to leave Isaac alone and he listened, but because he listened to **himself** and understood that his life's work was not to die or to kill in the bright glare of his awakening, but to spread its quiet, peaceful glow to his children, and to all of us.

For reasons I do not understand, in our modern Reform Jewish milieu, it has become almost an embarrassment to acknowledge that we are chasing our own glimmers of spiritual awakening. For too many of us, it would seem childish or self-indulgent to say that our passions are inflamed by desire for spiritual awakening.

And thus we stop seeking, or perhaps we never even start seeking, and we deprive ourselves of some of the most sublime emotions that life can elicit. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we don't have time for such foolishness. We pretend, even to ourselves, that we are too busy just getting through each day, paying the bills, maybe saving a little for a vacation or nice retirement.

But I am convinced, convinced as a matter of faith, that all of us are capable of experiencing energetic glimmers of wholeness and peace, and that it is part of our purpose in life to experience these moments more fully and more reliably. What I wish for myself and for all of us in this new year is that we leave our embarrassment behind, that we leave behind our **feeble** efforts to awaken and stay awake, and that instead we try **valiantly** to

awaken ourselves, to awaken each other, and to remain awakened. It is, after all, our father Abraham who teaches us that this is our highest purpose. There is peace out there, even in the midst of all our trouble. There is oneness. There is abundance. There is wholeness. There is peace. Amen.