

SHABBAT SERMON
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It is one of my favorite newspaper clippings, one that I tell again and again. The story is of a man from Virginia who killed his mother-in-law in the garage with a hatchet, and then explained to police that he mistook her for a raccoon! I love that story because it goes to the heart of a problem that has been with us from the very dawn of creation: taking responsibility for our actions. In fact, nobody did that until Abraham came along.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs has a marvelous book entitled, “To Heal a Fractured World,” but its subtitle is: “The Ethics of Responsibility.” In the book he points out that all of the stories in the Bible that begin with Creation and culminate with Abraham are all stories of responsibilities, or better yet, of not taking responsibility:

- Adam and Eve sin and eat from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. Adam took it like a man and blamed it on his wife!

- Cain and Abel ... the first murder in history with Cain’s chilling defense: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

- Noah was a righteous man but what’s the good if you save your life while you let everyone else drown?

- What followed was the generation of the Tower of Babel which took no responsibility toward each other or to God.

And then comes Abraham ... and everything changes. Abraham takes responsibility for himself, for his family, for his society. And he takes responsibility to God as well. Rabbi Sachs points out those opening words we read last week where God tells Abraham: “Lech lecha – get thee out from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation ...” that these three - your land, your birthplace, your father’s house - represent three aspects of our existence that people claim we are not responsible for. “Karl Marx held that behavior is determined by structures of power in society, among them the ownership of land. Therefore, God said to Abraham: ‘leave your land’. But there are those who believe that human conduct is given by the instincts we acquire at birth (genetic determinism) therefore God said, ‘leave your place of birth.’ Freud held that we are shaped by early experiences in childhood, therefore, God said: ‘leave your father’s house.’ God is telling Abraham: sure you have genetic influences and economic influences and childhood influences, but you must stand above them and take responsibility for your actions.

Abraham learned to do this, and today I want to point out three in our day who must learn to do the same. One is an individual, one is an organization and one is a society.

The individual is our President, Barack Obama. This week marked the first anniversary of Barack Obama being elected President of the United States. Has he done a good job, a bad job? That’s a matter of opinion and I think for most of us, the jury is still out. But one thing is

for sure: now he is the President ... he is in charge ... and he can't place responsibility for the problems our country confronts on the shoulders of others. But he and his administration are having a little problem with that. In terms of Afghanistan, his Chief of Staff, Ram Emanuel, recently said, "It's clear that basically we had a war for eight years that was going on that is adrift." In terms of our economy, the President recently said at a fundraiser, "I don't mind cleaning up the mess that some other folks made." On other issues he and his advisors speak of the problems their administration "inherited." Abraham could have done the same thing but he didn't! So, how long can the President say that? How long can all of our problems be blamed on George Bush? Don't get me wrong, George Bush tried to do the same thing in blaming everything on Bill Clinton's administration. But when 9/11 happened – and it came when George Bush hadn't been President as long as Barack Obama has been – Mr. Bush understood – we all understood – that it didn't matter anymore how we got into this mess. It was going to be his responsibility to get us out of this mess. Mr. Obama must learn to do the same for in not attempting to shirk his responsibility even if he gets things wrong, he can earn our respect. That's what he did with Rev. Wright. At first, he assumed no responsibility for being part of a church where the minister preached hatred for twenty years. But then he stood up and did what had to be done.

Which brings us to Rev. Wright and the NAACP. The NAACP is one of the most distinguished organizations in the U.S., being at the forefront of the fight for rights and justice for all people, irrespective of the color of their skin. So you tell me why the Anne Arundel County NAACP has invited Rev. Wright to be their guest speaker at an award ceremony? The story was told earlier this week on the front page of The Sunpaper; the NAACP is honoring Perry Ealim at its Freedom Fund Dinner on Nov 20th. Ealim owns a company that trains minority and women business owners and I'm sure he is worthy of an award. But The Sunpaper describes how many of his friends and supporters are not going to be at the dinner if Rev. Wright is speaking. And why should they? And why should a man who has preached hatred of America, of Israel, of Jews be chosen as the guest speaker? Aren't there more noble, more qualified ministers that could speak to such an august organization? For me what made matters worse was a statement by Mr. Eliam where he said that those who are refusing to attend the dinner because Rev. Wright is speaking are "more divisive than anything he could say." So who is responsible for the conflict regarding the NAACP's dinner? Not the NAACP, not Rev. Wright but the people who are protesting the terrible choice. That is just what Rev. Wright said when Mr. Obama broke his ties with him. Do you remember Rev. Wright's words? "Them Jews aren't going to let him (Obama) talk to me." Yes, it was the critics' fault ... when, in fact, he had no one to blame but himself. The NAACP played a major role in teaching our society that it must take responsibility for all of its actions. The time has come for the NAACP to do the same.

And a society that must learn to take responsibility for the actions of those in it is the ultra-Orthodox community. There is much to admire about the ultra-Orthodox community ... their religious observance, their family life, their commitment to Gemilut Chasadim – acts of loving kindness. But in recent years we have discovered that behind the good, there is, unfortunately, some bad. And some of it is very bad ... issues regarding child abuse and ethical and moral lapses on the part of many in the community. Whether these problems existed in the past or not, no one can say for sure, but the fact is, with the Internet and with blogs, nothing can be kept secret for long anymore. And the abuses that take place in the ultra-Orthodox community have been highlighted in many newspaper and Internet sites across the country.

And the response from the ultra-Orthodox community has been to blame it all on those who bring these abuses to light. Who is at fault for the Rubashkin Meat Co. that has had more than 100 Federal indictments issued against it? Listen to the words of one of the company's

biggest supporters: “This is an attack on religious Jews.” Yes, it’s the fault of the anti-Semites. Another ultra-Orthodox leader warns that those ultra-Orthodox Jews who are bringing these abuses to light and who are working to correct them are, in fact, undermining Judaism. In his words: “Stop blowing up every story that is reported in the press involving a religious Jew ... start standing up for the frum way of life.” Today’s children of Abraham need to learn a lesson of responsibility from our forefather Abraham. From day one, he accepted God’s challenge and he never faltered.

Which leaves us with one question. Our Torah reading this morning concluded with the ultimate test by God ... the ultimate taking responsibility by Abraham ... the Akeidah – the sacrifice of Isaac.

Why, after a life of serving God and taking responsibility for his actions, was there a need for another test? Perhaps the answer is found in the two Lech Lechas. Remember, right at the beginning of his journey: “*Vayomer Hashem el Avrohom* – and God said to Abraham.” *Lech Lecha m’artzecha u’mmoladetcha mibals avicha*. “Go from your homeland, your birthplace, the house of your father ... and you will be for a blessing.” Lech Lecha!

But now, toward the end of his life, God once again repeats these words for a mission and test of faith just as significant ... when Abraham is told: “*Lech Lecha el eretz ha-moriah* – Go to the land of Moriah upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you, there to offer your son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to me.” Our sages couldn’t help but take note of the fact that the same words of Lech Lecha are given both at the beginning and end of Abraham’s life. Both times he is commanded and challenged and tested by God asking him “to go.” What is the link between these two events? Even more, why the need for both of them?

Explained one great sage. The first time God tests Abraham and tells him: Lech Lecha – Go!, the biblical commentator Rashi immediately adds the words: “*L’voascha u’l-hanascha* – for your good and for your benefit.” God is telling Abraham – Go! It will be good for you. You’ll derive great benefit from it. I guarantee it. Indeed, the Torah tells us that God tells Abraham, “*Al tirah avrohom* – fear not, Abraham. I am your shield ... and he believed in God.” He passed the test. But before he was to leave from this world, Abraham had to be confronted with an even greater test ... for the second time that God tells Abraham Lech Lecha, when God tells Abraham to take his son atop Mount Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice, there Rashi – on the words Lech Lecha does not say “for your good and for your benefit.” There God offers no guarantees of safe passage. There, God does not promise to shield him and his family from any harm. And yet, once again, Abraham went and passed the test; the ultimate test of faith and accepting responsibility.

Yes, taking responsibility with no guarantee of success, no guarantee of reward, no guarantee of coming out on top, is not easy, but it is the mark of a responsible human being. And not only a human being, but of an institution as well. We can all learn from an institution named The Johns Hopkins Hospital. We are fortunate to live in a community that has what many consider the finest hospital in the world. But what I think is worthy of praise in the context of what I have spoken is not what Johns Hopkins does right, but something that they did wrong ... and what came of that. There is now a book called, “*Josie’s Story*,” written by Sorrel King. Josie King was an 18 month old child who was burned by scalding hot water in the bathtub of her home. She had second and third degree burns over 60% of her body. She was taken to the burn center at Johns Hopkins Medical Center. At first, people blamed her parents for what happened. But then, it was not only discovered that her parents were not at fault, but while at Hopkins there had been numerous mistakes made in her care. Josie died because of what the hospital called

“complications.” Johns Hopkins Hospital offered the King family a settlement if they would agree not to sue, and they told the parents that this money was in no way to be considered an acceptance of liability. The King family thought it over and realized that all the money in the world would not bring their baby back. And the more they looked into it, they realized that what had happened to their child at Hopkins happens to countless patients in hospitals all over the country; people die from the wrong medication or wrong dosage or from infections that could have been prevented. And they came to Johns Hopkins and made a proposal: they said that they would not sue, they did not want any money for themselves, but they wanted the money they might have collected had they sued to be put into a special fund – a fund to be called “Josie’s Fund” – and they wanted this fund to be used only for teaching the staff of the hospital how to prevent such mistakes from happening again.

The Board of Directors of the hospital agreed to the deal, against the advice of their lawyers. They gave the Kings permission to air Hopkins’ dirty laundry in public, they arranged for Josie’s mother to give a public speech at Hopkins about what had happened to her daughter in the hospital, and she got a standing ovation. And then, Johns Hopkins did something else that was remarkable ... they sent Mr. and Mrs. King on the circuit, and they arranged for them to speak at hospitals all around the country at Hopkins’ expense. Johns Hopkins Hospital could have taken its chances in court. It could have taken the advice of its lawyers and admitted no liability. By creating “Josie’s Fund” and by throwing open the facts of this case so that all can see the medical errors that were made in its hospital, Johns Hopkins Hospital had no idea of how their taking responsibility would be perceived. It’s not easy to take responsibility for a mistake when you are the number one hospital in the country. But perhaps that is why Hopkins is the number one hospital in the country! They acted responsibly and we can all learn from them.

Lech Lecha – from beginning to end, Abraham accepted God’s challenge. Abraham became the first person in history who took responsibility for his actions. And if we do the same, perhaps someday it will be said of us what God said to *Abraham*: “*V’avorechacha v’agadlah et shemecha v’hayei b’rocho* – and you will be blessed and your name will be great and you will be for a blessing.” Amen.

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