

# Dinner with Abraham

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 - 5769 (2008)  
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Last night I had dinner with Abraham the Patriarch. I was expecting quite a crowd, but it was just the two of us. Abraham the patriarch and me.

His ex-wife Hagar and him haven't been speaking for many years. No wonder – he threw her out and disowned their son.

He didn't even know where Yishmael was, but he heard that he married a non-Jewish Egyptian.

Isaac wasn't there either. Abraham says that he hasn't been in shul for years. Apparently Isaac is meditating somewhere in the fields, maybe India, traumatized by experiences of religious zeal. Abraham still hopes to find Isaac a good *shidach*.

Sarah wasn't there either. She died of massive heart failure upon hearing the news of Isaac's binding.

I asked about Abraham's nephew, Lot. Sadly, they had a falling out years earlier. A financial disagreement that was never fully resolved.

Last night, I had dinner with Abraham the Patriarch. I was expecting a crowd, but it was just the two of us.

Here I was, ready to speak to Abraham about the loftiest visions and ideals. Instead, we found ourselves speaking about our families, and our communities.

We spoke about divorce and about the failed family business. We spoke about parents who disown their children and children who disown their parents. We spoke about illness and infertility. About faith and the loss of faith, about hope, and about despair. Mostly Abraham and I spoke about living in a broken world.

Towards the end of the night, Abraham asked me for advice. I was shocked, I was humbled, I was stunned.

But Abraham insisted.

Abraham had to know: How do we re-engage the world when everything seems so broken?

I didn't have an answer. But I told Abraham that our rabbis offer a powerful midrash:

*Amar R. Yizhak: Otto HaYom Rosh HaShanah Haya,*

*Ve'Assah Mi'menu Chamesh Mitzvot.*

*Natal Karnav ve'Takah ba'hen,*

*Tzemer le'tchelet,*

*Orro le'tfillin ve'mezuzot,*

*Shokav le'chalilim,*

*Bnei mei'av le'kinorot.*

According to *midrash* that very day, the day on which Abraham offered a ram instead of his son, was none other than Rosh Hashanah. Abraham fashioned five *mitzvot* out of the ram's remains.

He used the horns to blow *shofar*. He used the wool to make fine blue thread for his *tzitzit*. He used the skin to make *teffilin* and parchment for mezuzahs. Finally, he used the inner parts to make a flute and a violin for the temple service.

For a moment, imagine that day. It was Rosh Hashanah and Abraham was a broken man. Isaac just left Mt. Moriah alone, and Abraham was soon to become a widow.

Still, our rabbis argue, Abraham carried on. He persevered. He found purpose and cause in these *mitzvot*.

What is the significance of these five *mitzvot*? What do these ritual objects teach us about ways to re-engage a broken world?

On Rosh Hashanah Abraham made a *shofar*.

The *shofar* is nothing but an amplified human cry. Its *tekiah* sound – a long, terrible wail. Its *shvarim* – the sobs of a hysterical cry. Its *truah* – a total breakdown.

On that Rosh Hashanah, Abraham began to cry. There were no words, there were no explanations. Just the total emotional exhaustion of a person whose world seemed to have collapsed. Abraham desperately wanted to sit *shivah* that Rosh Hashanah – and in his heart, he did mourn for the past. It was a *Tekiah Gedolah*, a long, and painful, and endless cry.

Abraham mourned for a long time, he mourned for mistakes he had made and for choices that he should have made. And for a long time all Abraham could see were his own tears. He was succumbed by his pain and nothing else mattered.

But one morning, the tears stopped and for the first time in a long time, Abraham saw the blue sky. For a moment he was inspired. He felt hope ebb in his heart. And for a split second, he remembered the Heavenly God, the One God, who once gave purpose to his life.

Abraham wanted desperately to hold on to that insight – he longed to have a bit of Heaven back in his life.

But Abraham had nothing – nothing but his pain – nothing but the remains of the sacrifice he made. Having no choice, he took the wool of the ram and dyed a blue thread – a blue thread for his *tzitzit*. It was a reminder of the vision he had once forgotten. It was a necessary reminder for on that day Abraham reclaimed his vision.

But Abraham's vision scared him. He remembered the last time he had a vision. He remembered how easily he was led astray. Abraham was full of doubt and dread. He wasn't ready to commit – he wasn't ready to bind himself to another crazy dream.

But the blue thread, the glimpse of heaven, remained with him. It kept reminding him of his reclaimed vision. And one day, Abraham woke up and decided that it was time to commit. This time, Abraham made a pair of *teffilin* from the skin of the sacrificed ram.

It took courage to put on those *teffilin*. Abraham had to gather all his inner strength as he fought to convince himself that this time...this time his commitments won't be in vain...won't lead him astray.

The *teffilin*, wrapped on his arm, placed on his head, became a sign that Abraham was once again engaged. He was again connected, ready to commit to his newfound vision. A new vision that once scared him so much.

But even with this newfound sense of commitment, Abraham could not face the world. He was terrified of social gatherings. He dreaded the communal events he once so loved.

Sure, Abraham could trust himself, could trust his new visions and his dreams. Abraham could even imagine believing in God again. But could he, and should he, ever trust the world? Can he ever love others or be loved again?

Time passed, and Abraham's vision and his sense of commitment urged him on. And one morning, Abraham decided to take the leftover skin of the sacrificed ram and he made parchment from it. And upon that parchment, with great focus, and great intent, he inscribed the words of the *shema*, "*Ve'Ahavtah*"—"You shall love," and "You will love," "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might."

With tender care, Abraham fixed the mezuzah upon the door. He even kissed it as he set foot outside for the very first time in a long time. It takes courage to stand at the door. It takes even greater heroism to walk over the threshold.

Abraham found a changed world. The Jewish thing seemed to have taken off. Abraham began attending services and people at shul didn't know who he was. But that didn't matter.

At times, Abraham was overcome with memories of the past. But this time, the tears just didn't come and Abraham knew exactly what to do. He realized that a new melody was about to be born.

Abraham took the remains of the ram and made a flute and a violin from them. He was ready to channel the past. Abraham was now ready to transform his lament into song.

How do we re-engage a broken world?

First we blow the *shofar*. We cry in protest, in disgust, and in pain. We mourn for the past—for what was, for what should have been.

But with time, tears make space for new dreams. We look out the window and we find a thread that connects us up to the heavens. We dare to see the blue in the skies and we gather strength as we re-claim our sense of vision.

Still with more time, we make new commitments. Like a pair of *teffilin*, we bind ourselves to the things we believe in, as we prepare to put our visions into practice.

And still, with more time, our journey continues into the world, past the doors of our home. We kiss the mezuzah as we re-claim our sense of trust in others, in ourselves. We learn to step out, we learn to leave our safe spaces behind. We dare to love again with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might.

And with time, with patience, with resilience, we begin to channel our past through flute and violin, through joy and through pain. What was once, and what now is, inspires new songs, and new hopes, and new prayers for others and ourselves.

These were the words that I shared with Abraham last night. Ancient teachings of our rabbis, rabbis who like us, had their own struggles, their own pain, their own defeats. Rabbis, who like us, refused to stop dreaming of mending a broken world.

Last night, as I left Abraham's house, I heard echoes of him blowing the *shofar*. I pray that the healing has begun.

I pray that this Rosh Hashanah we will also merit to hear the sound of new prayers and songs.