

"GROW UP!"

A Religious Imperative

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A sermon delivered by

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A RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE

Both Aramic translators of the Bible, Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uziel, present an interesting translation of one word at the beginning of this morning's portion which serves as a key to understanding this whole period in the life of Abraham. The patriarch is commanded, "get thee out of thy country, and from thy birthplace, and from thy father's house" (Gen.12:1). It is the Hebrew word molad'tekha which is normally rendered "thy birthplace," based on the root moledet. The Aramaic Targumim, however, translate the word as yaldutekh -- your childhood. Itparesh min yaldutekh, get thee out of thy childishness, is the significant command of G-d to Abraham.

Of course, Abraham was no longer a child when these words were addressed to him. Yet childishness is not only a matter of years; it is equally a matter of mental attitude. And the divine command to Abraham to grow up is the most significant event in the life of the patriarch thus far, an event the consequences of which first begin to unfold before us in this biblical portion and the next.

Lekh lekha thus becomes more than the story of Abraham's life. It is a guide to men and women of all ages in how to grow up. For maturity is fundamental to the life of mitzvot. A katan -- a minor, one who is immature -- cannot be a bar mitzvah. To grow up is a religious imperative.

The symptoms of maturity are manifold. The ramifications are far too many to discuss within the confines of one sermon. But if you investigate the record of Abraham, you find that the foremost expression of his maturity consists of largesse, generosity, bigness of character, an utter lack of pettiness and cheapness.

An argument develops between the shepherds of Abraham and those of Lot. It is a business quarrel that threatens the personal relationship of the two men themselves. Whose duty is it to initiate a reconciliation? Who ought to seek out whom to propose settling all outstanding issues between them amicably? Certainly, the answer is Lot. He is younger, he is Abraham's nephew, and, according to tradition, the disciple of the patriarch as well. Yet it is Abraham who takes the first step, who acts big. It is he who says to Lot, "let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee" (Gen.13:8). I will begin the process of patching things up. I will sue for peace. I will not stand on my dignity. (Winston Churchill once said that no man enhances his dignity by standing on it.) "For we are brethren" — and business questions must remain secondary to brotherliness. "Is not the whole land before thee?" — for men of good will, there is enough for everyone. "If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou take the right hand, then I will go to the left."

There is an interesting and edifying sidelight to this approach by Abraham to Lot. Immediately before the verse we have been quoting, the Bible informs us, "and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelt then in the land" (Gen.13:7). Is this not a non sequitur? What is the relevance of this odd bit of archeological information to our narrative? The answer, according to many of the commentators (see Sforno, Malbim, and Kelei Yakar), is that this phrase forms part of Abraham's speech to Lot. How will it look, he said to him, for us, who are relatives and believers in G-d and profess high ethical principles, to quarrel and wrangle whilst these two pagan tribes, complete strangers to each other, are able to live side by side in peace? Faced with the alternatives of a business gain or chilul ha-shem, Abraham knew what to choose — and it was not a petty choice.

So that Abraham appears to us as a biblical gentleman. He has the attribute of chessed, of largesse and generosity of spirit. To use a legal term, he has the ability to exercise what the Halakhah calls mechilah -- remission, the voluntary release of obligations owed to one. In Jewish Law, mechilah can be performed only by a mature individual, not by a katan or minor. Similarly, Abraham's maturity expresses itself in mechilah, in his capacity to forego his legitimate claims upon others.

Throughout his life, Abraham reveals this marvelous characteristic. For instance, he is involved in a domestic disagreement with his wife Sarah over their maid, Hagar. As we read the biblical narrative, we know that Abraham is in the right. Certainly Sarah is wrong in demanding that Hagar and her son Ishmael be banished into the desert. Abraham refuses -- and his position is the moral and ethical one. Yet G-d tells him, "in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Gen.21:12). Abraham again learns the same lesson in growing up. A mature person knows that in the event of a disagreement, even when you know that you are right, there are times when nevertheless you ought to concede, to submit, to give in.

Or take the case of Abraham's rescue of the King of Sodom. The pagan king, to whom a selfless, altruistic act is probably incredible and ludicrous, offers a "deal" to Abraham: return the troops to me, keep all the spoils as your reward. Again Abraham shows his capacity for mechilah, for gracious surrender of what is rightfully his due. I will take nothing, says Abraham, "lest you should say, I made Abram rich" (Gen.13:23).

This, then, is the sign of maturity: to be sufficiently self-confident not to press your claim too far; to have an advantage and not to push it too hard; to know how to step back *gracefully* and avoid head-on collisions.

To grow up means to be big enough to bend down to one lower than yourself. It means to fight if you must, as Abraham did, but never to humiliate an adversary unnecessarily. Chessed or mechilah, the expression of maturity, consists of knowing when to stop, when to release, when to withdraw.

We Americans witnessed a brilliant example of national maturity this past week or two during the Cuban crisis. Pres. Kennedy took a dangerous, calculated step when he announced the quarantine of Cuba. One wrong move, and we might have been the victims of one of two alternatives: either an irretrievable loss in the Cold War, or the reduction of our civilization to nothing more than a fine radioactive ash. There are those who criticize our President for not committing the full might of the American military to a crushing invasion of Cuba. It is a testament to our distinguished President that he did not follow such advice. He weighed the consequences carefully. He considered, as we later learned, the matter of American character, destiny, and history, and decided that we would be false to ourselves were we to execute a Pearl Harbor against another people. We have a young president, but his actions were graced with splendid maturity: he was forceful, but not overbearing; powerful, but not pulverizing; he knew when to hold back -- a sign of Abrahamitic greatness. Thank Heavens for that gift. Immaturity in a child may be annoying. In an adult it is disturbing. In high places of government it is deadly and disastrous.

Yet maturity is not without its risks. The process of maturing may sometimes be accelerated into premature aging. Some people think they are growing up when they are only growing old. The sense of largesse and self-restraint can often become indifference, unconcern, resignation. The ability to perform a tactical withdrawal from a single situation may become a total withdrawal from all situations. Instead of not pushing too hard, there are those who decide not to push at all: I've had enough, I'm tired, I don't care any more. What once was well-formed character becomes a brittle, rigid

attitude. Gone are the passionate concerns and zestful enthusiasms of youth.

Look at Abraham and you find that he avoided these pitfalls. He was seventy-five years old when he was commanded lekh lekha, to leave his ancestral land and, as the Tragumim have it, to leave his childishness. He learned how to grow up without growing old, to look forward and not backward. The gimatriya or numerical value of the words lekh lekha is one hundred, as the Baal Ha-Turim points out, indicating that at his advanced age he was not doting on the past but looking forward to the next one hundred years (he lived to the ripe old age of 175) in which he would reach the zenith of his career. At an age when others are groaning and grumpy with arthritis of character, Abraham was experiencing the growing pains of the spirit.

Take Abraham's sense of chessed or mehilah. Did it lead to indifference? It did not. He hears that Lot is a captive -- and the old saint becomes a soldier and leads a platoon to rescue his nephew. He learns that G-d plans to destroy Sodom~~ing~~ and he presents himself before the Lord in a persistent prayer that is the boldest dialogue with G-d in human history. Abraham, it is true, was commanded itparesh min yaldutekh, stop being childish; but he was also commanded heyeh tamim, " be thou whole-hearted" (Gen.17:1) -- or, be child-like, retain the charm and simplicity of youth; in your maturity do not lose a child's sense of wonder and marvel, never become devious, retain your ability to see loveliness and beauty where others can see only ugliness and turmoil, keep developing your sensitivity and sympathy and involvement in the world.

No wonder that our Tradition maintains that the coin minted in honor of Abraham contained, on one side, the picture of a zaken u-zekenah, an elderly man and elderly woman, and on the other side a bachur u- betulah,

a young boy and girl. For Abraham, like the elderly couple, had abandoned his childishness; but like the young people, he retained his child-like simplicity and enthusiasm.

It is appropriate at this point, and on this Sabbath, and from this pulpit, to pay tribute to one person who nobly exemplified this biblical teaching of maturity combined with youthfulness. I speak of a modern, not an ancient; a Gentile, not a Jew; a woman, not a man.

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the great spirits of our time. Her sympathetic and warm soul was such that the very knowledge of her presence was a source of comfort to all people in this, our terribly impersonal world.

Hers was a remarkable example of maturity. For her, growing up was a difficult and painful process. Homely, awkward, and hopelessly shy, she was first the object of parental derision and later an orphan. She had every reason to become an embittered, childish, self-centered adult. Yet she matured into a sweetness and generosity that raised her above her peers. She possessed in abundance the quality of chessed and she had the knack for mehilah: a regal dignity and gracious self-confidence and restraint in the face of hostility: the butt of cruel jokes, the target of political shafts -- even the victim of bitter epithets hurled at her by an intemperate churchman. Despite all this, she never turned vindictive or cynical. She never sank into the indifference that often comes with advancing age. To the end she remained concerned, involved, committed, with a child-like curiosity and liveliness.

We Jews will especially remember her gallant support for the State of Israel, her ready assistance in all worthy national and international Jewish philanthropic enterprises.

She was, to use the term of the Prophets, an ishah gedolah — a great, worthy lady; or, in the more specialized sense we have been using the term gedolah, she was truly a mature spirit, generous, benevolent, unselfish.

Throughout the world, her presence will be missed — and remembered.

Our Sidra, as the Aramaic translators viewed it, speaks particularly of Abraham, but generally of all men and women. The religious imperative to be mature is the beginning of a life-long process, and it involves knowing how to grow up without growing old, without giving up on the world.

These words are addressed to each of us. They remind us that maturity is an obligation, not a luxury — and an obligation not only to G-d and our fellow men, but to ourselves as well. For Abraham was commanded not lekh, "go," but lekh lekha, literally, go to yourself, return to the sources of your own soul.

To be mature means to accord with your inner nature.

To grow up means to be true to yourself.

By abandoning childishness, we gain — a destiny: "Get thee out of thy country, out of thy childishness, out of thy father's house, ... unto the land that I will show thee...."