

Rabbi Darren Levine
YK 5766
“Not to die, But live!”

The great Chassidic Master
Of the old country

Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki
Was surrounded by his
Students on his deathbed.

One of them asked:
What is the meaning of life.

The wise sage responded:

“In order to really live,
You must give yourself to death.

But when you have done so,
You discover that you are not to die,
But live.

Not to die but to live?
How so?

And with that exchange,
The Rabbi closed his eyes for the last time.

Not to die, but to live.

I want to explore the possible
Meaning of this story in the
Context of Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is when we fast, no eating or drinking
No marital relations, no bathing, no wearing lotions.

Some traditional Jews even wear a kittle-
The burial shroud to synagogue.

Each of these customs remind us of death,
Because on Yom Kippur,
We experience a symbolic taste of death.

Sadly and with great distress,

Death seems to be the theme of last year.

Darfur, the Tsunami, Katrina,
Iraq, the London subway attack, Gaza, Pakistan.

CNN, The Networks, The Times, The Journal,
Every headline it seems, worse than the previous day.

Surrounded by constant images of
destruction and death is, in a word, depressing

and the constant barrage of pain and suffering
can create within us,
vulnerability, alienation, and fear.

I certainly have been having more
Of these feelings lately.

But the Rabbi's lesson:

Not to die, but live.
Seems to be an important topic this year
As we consider,

a Jewish response to living a life of meaning in difficult times.

Our Torah reading today states:

I have set before you life and death, blessing or curse;
Choose life, that you and your descendants may live.

Here we have it.

In the billow of life and death that surrounds us,
Among the surge of blessings and the curses,
The Torah commands us "choose life"

So let us do just that.
Let us chose life!

I'm afraid this is easier said than done.

Just as we can chose to live a life that is fully alive
So to can we choose a life that is fully dead.

How we ascribe meaning to our

life experiences, is the difference
Between walking through life alive and engaged
And walking through life dead and withdrawn.

(pause)

Last week at Rosh Hashana,
We looked together at three occasions
When God tested Abraham.

Today (Tonight), I want to explore
another one of these tests with you
to see if we can glean some insight
into our dilemma.

This test happened on a day
When Abraham and his wife Sarah
were living in Mamre,

Abraham looked up and saw three strangers.

He ran to greet them and bowing low to the ground he said,
“My Lords, if it please you, let a little water be brought.”

Bathe your feet and recline under a tree
And let me fetch a morsel of bread for you.

What has always fascinated me about this story
Are the choices that Abraham made that day.

For the desert was likely a dangerous place.

It would have been understandable
For Abraham to reject the strangers, deny, ignore
But he chose to welcome them -

To invite them into his tent
And share his good fortune with them.

Abraham was able to do this
Because he chose to experience each encounter
in his life as a Divine test.

We are presented with similar encounters every day.
Do we think of them as divine tests?
Or just annoyances? Irritations?

Last week when Mayor Bloomberg
Announced the heightened terrorism
alert on the subway system,

And that the police would be increasing their
Random searches of bags and passengers.
I don't know about you, but I felt tense.

Because announcements like this create fear
And the natural response to fear is to become more
Anxious, defensive, and discriminatory.

And when this takes root in our being,
We close ourselves off even more to strangers
Which actually contributes to social tension,
Intolerance, and feelings of isolation.

Yet if we follow the Abraham model,
We would choose to embrace
the fear and the strangers.

Perhaps Abraham would choose to say:
"God, are you testing me right
now on this subway platform?"

Are you testing my actions and reactions
To this situation?

Yes, we need to be responsible citizens
And say something if we see something. . .

But we cannot let fear prompt us
To see every person as a potential threat.

In this way, perhaps we could merit
Abraham's good fortune. .

For as the Torah states:
Abraham walked with God.

To me, walking with God
Does not mean that we should
Offer up our lives as God's servants.

Rather it means to make

Ethical, tolerant,
Compassionate, and loving
Decisions about how we choose
To live our lives.

And not let fear distance
Ourselves from embracing the stranger.

But there is a second chapter
To this episode.

After inviting the strangers into his tent
With warmth, dignity and honor,
They told Abraham that his
Barren wife Sarah would become
Pregnant with a son.

“With a son, she laughed.
we will have a son?
With me and my husband so old?”

Jewish tradition teaches that
the promise of a son was
Abraham’s divine reward
for welcoming the strangers.

As if to say, “Abraham, by extending yourself to
the strangers, by the choice you made
to reach out to them in humanity . . .

by being open to the world
and not fearful, you will be rewarded
with the gift of a child.”

The point is that sometimes,
Strangers may be more than just strangers,
They may be divine messengers of a sort.

Let us extend the stranger metaphor one step further. . .
To the events in our lives that are
Strange, foreign, and sometimes, unwelcome.

I’m thinking now about the litany of
Loss of life and destruction
That we experienced as a world this year.

All of these tragedies, human or natural
Are strangers to us.
They are unwelcome. They take us by surprise.

And as we have seen from Louisiana to Pakistan
And from London to Basra,

We are rarely prepared for *these* types of strangers
And we regularly fail in our response to them.

But each time, just like the strangers at Abrahams tent,
These strangers too bear a message.

In Iraq, the message is that in war, everybody loses.

In London, the message is that religion can promote goodness and evil.

In New Orleans, the message is that economic disparity can kill and it does.

None of these events occurred
with the sole purpose to teach *us* a lesson.

The lesson or message comes afterward.

The question afterwards is,
“what we will learn from these lessons
That will teach us how to live our lives differently?”

Sometimes strangers bear gifts that are joyful
Sometimes strangers bear gifts that are painful

But joyful or painful, all gifts have value.

And though we cannot choose when the strangers come
We can chose how to respond to them when they do arrive.

The Abraham story is teaching two valuable
Lessons for how to live our lives.

On the surface level,
Strangers are just that:

People who we do not yet know
And perhaps are different from us.

But when we encounter them,

We should offer them our best selves.

For they are only strangers to us
Until we get to know them better
Or perhaps until we get to know ourselves better.

But on a deeper level,
Perhaps these strangers
Are the unwelcome events in our lives

Like unforeseen tragedy
Natural destruction
Human loss.

These are also strangers to us.

And when we encounter these “strangers”
Let us engage them in order to
To live our lives with more meaning.

Let these strangers be our mirrors,
reflecting back to us
An insight into our own true nature
And inspire us to reach for our best.

Whoever and whatever the strangers might be,
Whenever and however they enter our lives,

We choose how to respond to them

We can either reject them by isolating ourselves.
Or we can choose to encounter them fully

And perhaps be rewarded
by the message of change they bear.

This is the way Abraham lived.

This is how
Abraham walked with God.

And after a lifetime of walking with God.
The Torah states,

“that Abraham breathed his last,
Dying at a good ripe age,

Old and contented;
He was gathered into his kin.

He died old and contented,
A contentment that came
From the way
In which he chose to find
divine meaning his life's encounters.

No matter the circumstances,
He chose to always welcome the stranger,
forever open to the rewards they might bear.

Always tolerant, always compassionate,
always open to strangers –

And that which was strange to him.

This is how Abraham
made meaning in his life.

May 5766 be a year when we can live
A bit more like Abraham,

So when the time comes to be gathered into our kin
We may do so, old and contented. Amen.