

**“Where are you going?” – Sermon – Rosh Hashanah Morning  
September 30, 2008 - Rabbi Lawrence P. Karol**

**“Where are you going?”**

**This is a question that we might ask a person seeking directions or, these days, that we could very possibly hear from a talking GPS system. When we are standing at an airline ticket counter, “Where are you going” becomes “Where are you flying today?” As I entered Israel last February, “Where are you going?” was among the list of questions I was asked at the last checkpoint before being greeted at Ben Gurion Airport by the bride and groom at whose wedding I was about to officiate. I had to tell not only where I was going but also why I was there – and once I said “wedding,” the woman behind the glass said, “Mazal tov!”**

**It is said that, in Judaism, there is a prayer for almost everything. The “where are you going” meditation from our tradition is known as the Tefillat Haderech, the Traveler’s prayer. This is the version that I keep in my wallet at all times and that I read just before takeoff:**

**“May it be acceptable unto You, our Eternal God and the God of our Ancestors, that you will guide us toward peace, and direct us toward peace, and cause us to tread toward peace. Bring us to the place of our desires, to life, to joy, and to peace. Deliver us from the hands of any enemy or hidden foe or robbers or evil beasts on the journey, and from all kinds of trouble that may befall us in the world. Send a blessing to all the deeds of our hands. Grant us favor and kindness and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who behold us. Hear the voice of our supplications, for You are God who hears prayer and supplication. Blessed are You, O God, who hears our prayer.”**

**The T’fillat Haderech teaches us that every journey presents us with opportunities, adventures and challenges. The traveler’s prayer could be meaningful for a parent who is taking his or her teenager out to drive on local streets or who is driving a child to pre-school or summer camp or even college. Those words might be appropriate for a trip to the grocery store as much as for a**

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bicycle tour of a national park. The t'filat haderech could express our excitement as we take the trip of a lifetime to a destination we have always dreamed of visiting. It could also voice a hope for a safe return home for residents of cities and towns in the southern United States who obeyed evacuation orders to escape the wrath of recent hurricanes and who now seek to put their homes and their lives back together.

“Where are you going?” is a question that doesn't have to apply only to our movement from one geographical location to another. The “enemies, robbers, hidden foes or evil beasts” in the Tefillat Haderech were probably real threats at one time. On a symbolic level, they can represent obstacles we face every day when we aren't technically “on the road again” but when we are reaching for our personal goals. We often demonstrate courage and strength when we start a new job that may not guarantee an income at first, when we speak out for an unpopular position in a local debate or on a national controversy, when we assume a leadership position in a troubled organization, when we have a difficult conversation with an employee about areas for personal improvement, and when we reach out to someone to try to begin or maintain a friendship.

The ultimate goal for these life situations is articulated well in the Traveler's prayer Meeting each challenge can lead us “to the place of our desires, to life, to joy, and to peace; to a place where people approach us with kindness and mercy; to a place where all that we do brings blessing.”

Sometimes our goals and our dreams may seem out of reach because of an unexpected challenge that has the potential to shake our confidence and break our spirit. Take Abraham in the Torah reading this morning – he had it all – God's blessing and favor, two sons who would both become great nations. But his wife Sarah had just insisted that Abraham banish her maidservant Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's and Hagar's son. They left and were, so the Torah says, protected by

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God. And then came the divine command to Abraham – take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and make an offering in the place that I will show you. The place where Abraham was commanded to take Isaac was Mount Moriah, a three day’s journey from home. The Torah text made those three days go very quickly, with only one conversation between father and son that concluded that the “two of them walked together.” I would like to think that Abraham held out hope that the end of their journey wouldn’t include his son’s death by his hand. Either he made this nearly tragic trek with his son begrudgingly, or he pressed forward with complete faith, with a firm conviction that he had no choice but to fulfill God’s command.

Within this tale, did Abraham ask himself the question, “Where am I going? Why am I doing this?” We don’t know. The sages of our tradition imagined that Abraham must have had to explain to someone the reason for his journey. In the stories the rabbis wove around this narrative, they brought the biblical figure Satan into the tale to pose an extra challenge to Abraham, as if God’s command wasn’t enough. Satan, in the bible, wasn’t simply a “prince of evil,” but a “Cosmic prosecuting attorney” who had the role of sending to the breaking point any person whom God considered to be faithful and righteous. In the encounters between Abraham and Satan in the Jewish literature known as Midrash, Satan first appeared in disguise, as an older man, then a younger man, and then as himself. Each time, he asked Abraham, “Where are you going?” Abraham first replied that he and Isaac were going to pray. Later, Abraham claimed that he and his son were going to study. Finally, when Satan told Abraham that he wouldn’t end up sacrificing Isaac in the end, implying that their journey had no real purpose, Abraham and Isaac ignored Satan’s protest and continued on their way.

The question that remains for us in reading this tale is not “Where are you going?” but “Why did Abraham go? Why didn’t he protest this seemingly cruel

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directive? He could have said something, even one word, to indicate his objection to the command. We know, however, that sometimes we must walk along the path set before us, no matter how difficult it might be or how impossible it might seem. Caring for a parent, a child, a spouse or a friend facing a serious illness is a journey we know we have to take whether we feel up to the task or not. We might want to say, “I am not strong enough – I can’t do it!” But we do it because we know it is important to take upon ourselves the responsibility of being supportive, helpful and, yes, strong for someone close to us. With regards to Abraham, we have every right to ask why God would command Abraham to sacrifice his son in the first place. Many sages concluded that this experience and test had the sole purpose of teaching Abraham NOT to engage in human sacrifice to worship God, when such sacrifices were common among ancient peoples. Would there have been another way to teach this lesson? Perhaps, but the Torah narrative seems to sense that Abraham could take it. One rabbinic explanation about why God tested Abraham in this way echoed the statement that we sometimes hear today, “God wouldn’t give you a challenge greater than you could handle.”

I had dismissed that rabbinic explanation many years ago, but I reconsidered it when I read the book, **THE LAST LECTURE**, by Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon professor who died this summer after facing cancer with open courage and a positive attitude towards life. There are many pearls of wisdom in his book, but Pausch offered an insight that directly related to the rabbinic notion of why Abraham was tested. In the chapter entitled, “I Never Made It to the NFL,” Pausch wrote about his football coach, Jim Graham, whom he respected for focusing on the fundamentals of football in a way that sharpened the skills of every player. Pausch remembered, “Coach Graham used to ride me hard, I remember one practice in particular. ‘You’re doing it all wrong, Pausch. Go back! Do it again!’ I tried to do what he wanted. It wasn’t enough. ‘You owe me, Pausch. You’re doing push ups

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after practice.’ When I was finally dismissed, one of the assistant coaches came over to reassure me. ‘Coach Graham rode you pretty hard, didn’t he?’ he said. I could barely muster a ‘yeah.’ ‘That’s a good thing,’ the assistant told me. ‘When you are not doing well and nobody says anything to you, that means they’ve given up on you.’” Pausch concluded, “That lesson has stuck with me my whole life. When you see yourself doing something badly and nobody’s bothering to tell you anymore, that’s a bad place to be. You may not want to hear it, but your critics are often the ones telling you they still love you and care about you, and want to make you better....Self esteem? Coach Graham knew there was really only one way to teach kids how to develop it: You give them something they can’t do, they work hard until they find they can do it, and you just keep repeating the process.” Pausch explained that when parents send their children to play organized sports, they want them to learn teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, and an ability to deal with adversity. He used the sports term “head fake” to describe those not-so-hidden benefits of taking part in sports and, more important, “what we can learn along the way” during our varied experiences. The tasks we fulfill and the challenges we face as parents, children, siblings, community members, and in our occupations, offer deeper lessons that we may not realize we are learning until we are well into the process. That, said Pausch, is the most vital and crucial head-fake that life can give us.

Was there a “head-fake” in this biblical story of the binding of Isaac, the Akedah? The tale itself ends with Isaac’s life preserved, but still no protest from Abraham. The rabbis imagined, in the midrash literature, that Abraham did protest in the end, pointing out to God how he knew all along that the command to sacrifice Isaac contradicted the promise he had received beforehand that his family line and his faith would continue only through Isaac. Because Abraham had fulfilled God’s command and made the journey without hesitation, he demanded

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from God that all of his descendants be granted forgiveness when they would approach God with a sincere desire to atone for their sins. God said yes, and that may be, in some small way, the “head fake” of the Akedah, that Abraham’s steadfast resolve created a bond that produced the compassion and mercy that seemed so absent in the story of the binding of Isaac.

The head-fakes that lead us to hidden lessons when we face challenges in our lives are not always obvious, but they are definitely there. Starting a new job can teach patience, humility, perseverance, creativity, tenacity and, certainly, hope. Speaking out for an unpopular position demonstrates how consistency and commitment to a cause can win the respect of colleagues and community members. Working within any organization enables members to identify their unique individual talents and to develop ways of getting along and moving forward with a shared sense of mission and enthusiasm. Telling a co-worker how he or she can improve, while affirming his or her strengths as well, offers an opportunity to learn how to choose words that will help a person to grow in confidence and ability. Creating and nurturing friendships brings into our lives people with whom we can share ideas, dreams and feelings. We gain from these closest of relationships personal affirmation and support that can help us meet challenges, overcome obstacles, and, in the words of the traveler’s prayer, reach a destination where we will find kindness, blessing and peace.

Every experience in our lives is like a journey that may direct us to fulfill an immediate task and, at the same time, enable us to take one more step towards realizing a dream we have had all our lives. When we encounter difficulties that we think we can’t handle, we can assert our ability to face any challenge and commit ourselves to learning lessons along the way that can lead us to our ultimate destinations. As we move forward towards the dreams that lie before us, let us hope that our paths will enrich our lives and help us to grow in confidence and integrity. Let us listen to the traveler’s prayer, the T’FILAT HADERECH, once

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more, this time, as rendered by composer Debbie Friedman, with a sense of trust and faith that that these wishes will guide our hearts and minds along our journey through a New Year:

**May we be blessed as we go on our way**

**May we be guided in peace.**

**May we be blessed with health and joy.**

**May we be sheltered by the wings of peace.**

**May we be kept in safety and in love.**

**May grace and compassion find their way to every soul.**

**May this be our blessing. And let us say Amen.**