

Drashah Vayera 5770—These boots were made for walking

One of my favorite things to do on Shabbat afternoon is to take a walk. What makes the Shabbes walk more special than any other walk I might take is that I'm not actually going anywhere. I'm simply walking. This ritual of the Shabbes walk has become a much-loved part of Jeff's and my Shabbat practice. Each week, weather and time permitting, we set off on a mini-journey, exploring the surrounding neighborhoods and the hidden wonders only accessible by foot. On our walks, we've met many neighbors, seen incredible parts of nature—like the time we encountered a great horned owl's nest with newly hatched owls inside, and appreciated the blessing of time spent outdoors.

The other week, Jeff wanted to show me a new trail he had discovered. When I pressed him for further information, he demurred—this would be a surprise. I tend to like surprises, but this one wasn't working for me. The less I knew about where we were going, the more I needed to know. I just wasn't satisfied with walking to some unknown destination. Although our Shabbes walks could

hardly be described as purposeful, there was something about the aimlessness of our journey that was getting to me.

We see a similar response from Avraham in this week's parasha. Avraham—whose story in the Torah begins with the famous command: לך לך, *lekh l'kha*, Go Forth, and who again hears that same command at the end of our Torah reading this morning—is a person who knows what it is to journey. Throughout the course of the two parashiyot that tell his story, he has left his ancestral home in Haran, gone to Canaan, traveled to the Negev, descended to Egypt in search of food, and settled back in Canaan, where he also wandered, moving from place to place. Avraham is certainly our most peripatetic patriarch—but it's not clear that he enjoyed his travels.

In chapter 20 of Bereishit, Avraham has an encounter with Avimelekh, the king of Gerar (one of the many places Avraham sojourned). As they resolve their conflict over Sarah, Avraham reflects on his life of journeying—ויהי כאשר התעו אתי אלקים מבית אבי, “So when God made me wander from my father's house...” (20:13). Avraham's word choice seems to indicate that he is unhappy with his

progress—he sees himself aimlessly going from place to place, rather than purposefully heading toward a goal.

Our traditional commentaries make this point even more explicitly. Rashi, the foremost medieval Torah commentator, paraphrases Avraham's words, "When the Holy Blessed One took me out of my father's house to be a drifter, to roam from place to place..." (comment to 20:13). Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, who himself was a wanderer, explains that Abraham was traveling from place to place, not knowing where he was going. These comments seem almost uncomfortable with the idea that Avraham's constant traveling would be—or at least feel to him—purposeless. Rashi even cites numerous other occurrences of the verb "to wander" in the Bible to show how Avraham must have understood the goal of his journey. Other commentators accept the aimlessness of Avraham's journeying, but blame God for his dilemma—describing God as having exiled Avraham (Rashbam), or uprooted him (Sa'adiah Gaon).

Regardless of where they lay the blame, all of our traditional commentators find the prospect of an aimless journey—particularly one instigated by God's command—untenable. But given that Avraham himself had trouble understanding the purpose of what he

was doing, it's left to us to find meaning in all of his traveling. The first place we can look to uncover the meaning of Avraham's constant motion is back in Rashi's commentary, where he mines other places in the Bible to find the hidden goals of the journey. One of the verses he quotes comes from Psalm 119, in which the speaker describes himself as, תעיתי כשה אובד, "I have strayed like a lost sheep," and then continues, in a plea to God, "Search for your servant." Here, Rashi is using this verse to describe Avraham as a lost sheep, wandering without a clear sense of direction, but still reaching out, looking for God and yearning for connection. Rashi re-casts Avraham's wandering as seeking, searching for God and for the kind of purpose that comes with relationship to the Divine. Avraham is a man on an uncertain mission, but on a mission nonetheless.

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, a Hasidic master of the 19th century, also sees a deeper meaning in Avraham's journeys. He explains that people were sent into this world in order that holy sparks be drawn forth from all places. In the Hasidic worldview, following the mystical teachings of Kabbalah, our imperfect world is scattered with divine sparks. Each time a person uncovers a spark, she brings the world that much closer to

redemption. Avraham, says the Sefat Emet, was meant to discover and redeem divine sparks in each of the stops along his journey. Many of the places Avraham sojourned were inhospitable, or even dangerous. Here, too, teaches the Sefat Emet, there were divine sparks to redeem. It would have been quite easy for Avraham to be taken in by the wicked people and unholy environments in which he found himself, but instead, through seeking God at each stop on his journey, he discovered spark after divine spark, bringing himself, and those who surrounded him, just a little bit closer to redemption. Avraham's journey brought him gifts that he could not have imagined, gifts that he didn't even think possible while he was traveling. Uncertain of his destination, Avraham still persevered in his unending travels, reaching out to God through his uncertainty. This was the true purpose in his seeming aimlessness.

In this way, Avraham's journey is also our journey. In his comments on this week's parashah, Rabbi David Ackerman says, "In this regard, Abraham is all of us; our lives in so many ways follow the same trajectory of purposeful, personal journeys, undertaken in unreliable circumstances, in search of uncertain results. And yet, we continue to walk."

In other words, we don't always have to know where we're going to know that we're going somewhere. Avraham may not have had an awareness of the significance of each of his stops—from his own words in the parashah, it seems that he might have found his travels random, taxing, and purposeless. Looking at his journey as a whole, through the lens of the two parashiyot that catalog it, we can see how each place gave Avraham the opportunity to discover and elevate the divine sparks that were hidden there. And while we may not be able to give that awareness back to Avraham, we can use it to understand our own journeys.

Each of us is on a journey. Perhaps we know where we're ultimately headed, perhaps we're less sure. In both cases, we're sure to make many unplanned stops along the way. Like Avraham, those stops may seem like digressions, keeping us from our intended destination. And like Avraham, we would do well to have more patience with ourselves, appreciate our wandering, and have faith that those unexpected interruptions give us the chance to uncover some divine sparks—in the form of new relationships, new experiences, new knowledge about ourselves.

On that walk a couple of weeks ago, I finally let go of my need to know where we were going, and simply allowed myself to enjoy and appreciate what we found—and what we found was exciting. We followed a brief trail that ended up in a playground—and there are few things as exhilarating as stepping back into the thrills of childhood on the swings. We found a communal gardening area, tucked into the wetlands of some of the town environmental reservation, and saw the remnants of squash and tomatoes, with the leftover parsley threatening to take over the whole area. We discovered a horse farm, nestled into an otherwise residential neighborhood. And, appropriately enough, we found a new trail, a new place to explore. .

Looking back on that walk, I can no longer imagine what it would have been like to set out on such a journey with a firm destination in mind. Each of our stops along the way turned out to be a destination in and of itself.

May we all see our journey as a meaningful one, and may we all enjoy our stops along the way.