

Sermon Parashat Toledot 5767

“Stopping up the Wells or Opening New Channels: Sustaining Faith in a Modern World” Rabbi Jay M. Stein

One of the most popular songs of my youth was a song by Harry Chapin entitled “Cats in the Cradle.” It was a pretty long song whose lyrics were quite powerful. Essentially, the song was about an absent father who longs for a relationship with his son long after that is possible. Not having enough time for his child when the boy was small, the boy finds he has no time for his father as he gets older. It is a painful story, as are most of Chapin’s stories, but it left an indelible imprint. The melody and reference to the childhood rhyme have made such an impact on me that I believe much of my parenting style is reactionary to this one song. Popular culture can have such a powerful impact on who we are, what we believe is acceptable and what we believe. Trendy culture as expressed in film, television, print and music can change what we think. When the statement these mediums make resonates within us, we know there is a kernel of universal truth at its core. As Hillel Halkin wrote this past week in “Commentary” while reviewing a book by David Evanier, “Fiction always strives to become non-fiction.” When we believe in a story, it’s as though it really happened.” (November 2006, page 59).

It is possible the story Chapin tells really didn’t happen, but it bares such a striking resemblance to reality, we can’t help but be moved. Therefore, as much as possible, I try to spend time with my children, not because they are just plain fun to be around but because the lesson I learned was if you want a relationship than you must make the investment, a lesson I continue to learn as an adult. If this past weekend has been filled with difficult conversations and forced dialogue with relatives, then it’s clear we haven’t made the investment, either in time or emotion, to solidify that relationship. If that is true in the concrete, tangible world of connection to each other as human beings, than it is all the more significant in our association to God.

Belief is hard to come by, especially in a society that devalues belief. We live in the age of “prove it to me.” We dwell in the time of scientific discovery that has a cynicism which makes belief hard to come by. Stephen Carter acknowledged ten years ago that we live in a “*culture of disbelief*.” Academic scholarship lauded that Faith is a liability and the casualty is a life devoid of real meaning and purpose. We have been duped by the modern world into relinquishing our sense of belief, of true belief, of core belief.

Today I tell you how to regain true belief. I can’t defend it, nor do I need to. I can only tell you how to get it and how to keep it. The formula is easy. First we get it from our parents, our friends, our faith leaders and our faith communities. Second we nurture it. Recently I received a birthday that said, “A wise rabbi once gave the following advice on how a person can live to 120 – first get to 119 and then be very careful.” This is also true of faith. First, find something to believe in and nurture it, care for it, work it. Everyday we are treated to wonders and kindnesses that remind us of the profound lives we can lead, but we must work at recognizing it and we must work at the relationship. God is

alive and living in each of us. God runs deep but we need to dig down to find it. I truly believe we are wired in our genetic code to believe, but we have so much debris covering it that we have lost our sense of it.

That is why this week's Torah portion is about Isaac again digging the wells of his father. Isaac is hard wired to believe, but he needs to arrive at this on his own. Again, we get it from our parents, our friends our faith leaders and our faith communities. Second, we need to nurture it and dig for it one shovel-full at a time.

וְכָל־הַבְּאֵרֹת אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ עַבְדֵי אַבְרָהָם בְּיַמֵּי
אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו סִתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיִּמְלְאוּם עֶפֶר:

For all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them up, and filled them with earth. (Genesis 26:15)

רבינו בחיי על בראשית פרק כו פסוק טו
ויש שפ"י כי הבארות הללו רמז לגרים שנתגייר
בימי אברהם כי הם קלים לקבלת האמונה כמו הבארות שהם
קלים לקבלת המים ופתיחת הלב הסתום באמונה

Rabbeinu Bahya says the wells are just a symbol of faith. The act in which the Philistines engage is a desire to stop up our wells and squelch our faith. The way to kill us is not to destroy our bodies but to rob us of our faith. The ancient world, like the modern, seeks to close the wells of inspiration and faith. Whether purposefully or not, the modern world works against a life that sees more than an immediate world. However, we have always looked beyond ourselves. The wells of our commitment to faith run deep, but we must be prepared to do the back breaking, mind stretching work in order to acquire it. This happens one step at a time. Rabbeinu Bahya says
קלים לקבלת המים ופתיחת הלב הסתום באמונה

Once the wells are dug it is easy to draw water and open our closed hearts with belief. This is so powerful. "Open our closed heart with belief."

Digging a well is difficult work but it is much easier when our parents have prepared the ground for us. However, digging deep is hard work and this cannot be done in one day. Faith comes one step at a time. You can't go to sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow as a person of absolute belief, but tomorrow you can be one step closer – you must make that choice.

In the beginning of this week's narrative, Soleveichik makes a great comment when evaluating Essau's hunger. Essau is famished because he lacks a sustainable faith, therefore he is always hungry. Soleveichik suggests Essau's hunger can't be satisfied because he is eating the wrong food. He lacks the protein of faith and only eats the carbohydrates of immediate gratification so he is hungry almost immediately. This is so true of our own lives. We become like Essau, only seeking our next meal, so we are never satisfied. We must nurse on the milk of belief, faith, inspiration and trust in the Almighty.

The concrete satisfaction that comes from making a living or cutting a deal pales in comparison to the sustainable, purposeful life born of faith.

Sometimes we must re-do our parents work. We must re-dig their wells to generate a flowing life-force critical to our own survival. Just as Isaac understands that re-digging the wells of his father and grandfather affirms his faith, so we must do the same. I believe that with perfect faith, and if we do the work of sincere prayer, genuine study, and focused meditation, we will taste the sweet waters of an elevated life.

We want to believe. Yes, we want to believe but we seem to need permission. That is why the most popular word in religious life is Amen. Amen comes from the word *Emunah*, and is the same root, the same word. Belief. When we recite the kaddish we say *yitgadal vitytkadash shemay rabbah* and then “Amen.” As I have pointed out so many times, we can’t help ourselves. We have been taught this response all our lives and that is why, though it is not in the text, we can’t help ourselves. When we say God is great and powerful, we are compelled to say, Amen. I believe we are hard wired to respond this way. You want to believe – so today I give you permission. It doesn’t mean you have been tricked by established religion to buy into a fairy tale or a complex, made up story.

“Eyn Keloheinu.” is our favorite song that we sing on Shabbat. This song is popular because it is very close to the end of the service and we can already taste the Kiddush on our lips. We already anticipate the conclusion of a morning spent hard at work developing and affirming our relationship with God, but embedded in this song is a profound message. On page 182, the first letter of each stanza makes a powerful statement. Aleph, Mem, Nun, Bet Aleph which spells out two words Amen and Ba which means faith is coming and belief is on its way. Faith is on its way, so just open the door and make it feel at home in your soul. This is what takes the work.

You get to choose what influences your life. You can choose the popular culture or our sacred texts and tradition. You can choose the pop icons – music and television stars - or the faith leaders who have earned your trust.