The Moral Courage of Us All (Report Back from I/P Trip)
Parashat Vayera 5787
October 31, 2026
Rabbi Evan Traylor, CBE Assistant Rabbi

Shabbat Shalom! Yasher koach, Madeleine! Thank you for your thoughtful words about one of the most challenging stories in our tradition. The Binding of Isaac raises big questions about loyalty and obligation, connection and relationship, and ultimately life and death. Madeleine, you questioned whether or not Abraham actually "passed the test." That perhaps in obeying God's command, Abraham had passed one kind of test. But, in doing so, perhaps he had failed a different test, one testing his relationship with his son, Isaac, and his wife, Sarah. And in failing this test, he was perhaps lacking one key characteristic: moral courage. Moral courage is the ability to stand up for what is right, to refuse to go along with the status quo because it's safe or convenient or easy, to take action and truly make our communities and world a better place.

During this story, Abraham could have questioned God's directions. He could have refused. He could have done a dozen other things, but he didn't in that moment. Many Jews encounter this story as one that demonstrates Abraham's perfect faith in God, especially seeing the ways that Abraham is rewarded after the experience. And that may be true - for that story. But earlier in the same Torah portion, just before the Binding of Isaac, Abraham directly argues with God about the fate of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah. God has decided to destroy these cities for their sinful behavior, but when God tells Abraham of this plan, Abraham objects. He attempts to use his relationship with God to protect the innocent of the two cities. He cries out: חָלִלָה לְּךָ הֲשֹׁפֵט כׇּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט׃, "Far be it from you, God! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"[1] It is a moment of immense moral courage, Abraham standing up for the innocent of these cities, attempting to bring about justice and righteousness, doing something, anything to make the world even just a little bit better.

By challenging God's actions directly, Abraham steps into the פֶּרֶץ, a Hebrew word that can be translated as a breach, a gap, the space between two entities or realities. In a parallel story to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Prophet Ezekiel preaches about the wickedness of the Israelites themselves, wronging the poor and defrauding the stranger. These actions have led to a desolate land, and God is again considering destroying everything, sending the people into exile from the Holy Land. Ezekiel exclaims God's fury: "And I sought someone among them to repair the wall וְעֹמֵד בַּפֶּרֶץ, and stand in the breach before Me on behalf of this land, that I might not destroy it; but I found none."[2] In this instance, God is searching for someone, anyone, to stand in the breach, to lead the people toward righteousness and justice; but no one rose to the occasion. In Abraham's case though, Abraham sees the פֶּרֶץ, the breach,

[1] Genesis 18:25
[2] Ezekiel 22:29-30

between God and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and chooses to intervene with an enormous amount of moral courage.

As we understand these stories from our tradition, and as we consider this idea of moral courage, and what it takes to step into the breach, I can't help but think about the many courageous people, Israelis and Palestinians, that I encountered only a number of days ago. As some of you may know, 25 CBE members traveled with myself and Rabbi Timoner to Israel, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank. Half of our group was under the age of 40; half over 40. We spent equal time in Israel and Palestine, and half of our time was spent learning from Israelis, and half with Palestinians. Our group entered the trip with a wide variety of ideas, perspectives, and understandings of this place and its peoples, but together, we encountered sites and heard from people who demonstrated the full variety of the human experience, allowing us to connect through our shared humanity. This in and of itself is an act of moral courage, engaging with people sharing their hard truths, sitting in their pain and hurt, hearing different voices and ideas, understanding their realities, choosing to listen to the people most impacted by the cycles of violence that have plagued that Holy Land and those peoples for far too long. I'm so incredibly proud of our travelers and the attention, focus, and care they exhibited throughout our trip. And then there were the people themselves, individuals, Israelis and Palestinians, demonstrating their own moral courage in their community building, their advocacy, their organizing, their strategizing, their hopes and dreams. And, perhaps most importantly in this moment in time, they are refusing to side with the extremes of the situation, and choosing something different, a path forward for all people to thrive. Each of them, their own "profile in moral courage", and I'd like to share some of their stories with you this morning:

Ruchela met us under tall trees as we got off the bus at K'far Aza, one of the kibbutzim hit hardest on October 7th. We walked along the sidewalk, passing homes obliterated by Hamas terrorists. Walls showing hundreds of bullet holes, entire homes smashed open and destroyed, wine bottles left open from the Shabbat before the attack. Ruchela detailed how the kibbutz was committed to rebuilding, bringing families back, and eventually building a memorial to remember all who were killed and kidnapped on that horrific day.

Abed, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, met us in the bustling streets of Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv. Although he at one time served as a city council member, he spoke movingly of the need to support his community beyond politics, through service and grassroots community organizing. As a parent, he tries, every day, to build an Israel/Palestine where his children will be safe from violence and can truly thrive in who they are.

As we left our hotel in East Jerusalem, Amir, an Israeli from Jerusalem, joined our group as we made our way to Hebron. As a soldier in the IDF stationed in Hebron, Amir told us he was responsible for three main tasks: protecting Israeli settlers, preventing terrorist attacks against Israelis, and disrupting the daily lives of Palestinians. He guided us around the Cave of the Patriarchs, where our oldest ancestors are buried, to a once thriving Palestinian market that is

now devoid of any and all activity because Israeli settlers, with the help of the IDF, have restricted Palestinian access to the street indefinitely. The cruelty and indignity of the occupation was on full display throughout the quiet city streets of Hebron.

Surrounded by a lush garden off a quieter street of Ramallah, Bushra shared her expertise with us as a humanitarian aid worker. Although she grew up outside of the region, she made an active choice as an adult to move to Ramallah, part of a growing movement of young Palestinians choosing to live in their ancestral homeland and try to make it better. She seamlessly explained complex international law concepts to our group, helping us understand her perspective as a Palestinian in the West Bank. and provided thoughtful analysis of the devastation of the past few years. Beyond the statistics and reports, her fiery analysis demonstrated her immense passion and care for her people and this place.

After a long day of exploring Tel Aviv, Noah shared with us his perspective on Israel/Palestine as someone who grew up in the United States, but chose to make aliyah as a young adult. He shared his love of Jewish culture and practice, and how it has come to thrive in this place. His most urgent plea to us was to not give up - don't give up on making Israel a loving and just homeland for our people, and don't give up on Israelis, inviting us into partnership to make a positive impact throughout the land.

Amidst the rugged backdrop of the South Hebron Hills, our group entered the small Bedouin village of Umm Al-Kheir. Khalil, one of the residents who welcomed us with delicious food, shared the story of his brother, Awdah, who was killed just last year by Yinon Levy, a notorious Israeli settler who has not been held accountable by the state of Israel. Amidst his pain, amidst the near-daily attacks by Israeli settlers trying to kick them off their land, Khalil remains focused on supporting his community, keeping them safe, and working for a better, safer future for the children of the community.

Finally, on long, stretching bus rides, down the coast of the Mediterranean or waiting at an IDF-instituted checkpoint outside of Ramallah, our guides throughout our experience, Morgi and Emili, shared their own perspectives with our group. Morgi, an older Israeli woman from Jerusalem, couldn't wait to greet Emili, a young Palestinian woman from Nazareth, at the beginning of our tour. They shared about their families, their experiences leading various groups, and their hopes and dreams for the future. At the end of our time in Ramallah, Emili shared with us: "Don't be pro-Israel or pro-Palestine; be pro-solution." And Morgi, for her part, shared with us her motto: "Hope is a muscle." The exact words of wisdom we needed as we concluded our time together.

I wish that I could share with you even more fully the stories of these individuals, or even mention the courage of Eve, Obada, Rula, Borris, Hamed, Ofer, Mustafa, and more. If you'd like to hear more "profiles in courage" from the people we encountered on this trip, I encourage you to watch or listen to Kabbalat Shabbat services from last night, in which several of our

travelers shared their own reflections. And, as we also shared last night, we will be embarking on a similar trip to Israel/Palestine next fall and I hope you'll join us.

For however we interpret Abraham's silence during the Binding of Isaac, it is clear that elsewhere in Parashat Vayeira we witness a dose of moral courage from our ancestral patriarch, stepping into the breach on behalf of innocent people. A courage to push back, against none other than God, to pursue righteousness and justice. And although we can be inspired by the people I shared about this morning, or other more famous instances of individuals acting with moral courage, we know, deep down, that each of us too can bring forth moral courage into our world. Doing what we know to be right to support our loved ones and our neighbors, building up strong communities rooted in love and hope, and ultimately pursuing a world that is more whole, and just, and compassionate. We hold opportunities for this work every day, and if you're searching for a way to start, there's no better opportunity than Election Day on Tuesday. In an environment that tries to tell us that our voices don't matter, the best response, the courageous response, is to make sure our voices are heard. In the words of the Psalmist, חֲזַק וְיַאֲמֵץ לִבֶּךָ, may each of us, and all of us, be strong and courageous, and may we feel that strength and courage deep within in our hearts each and every day. Shabbat Shalom.