

## 2024 HUC Ordination Address

For a number of years I lived about a 20 minute walk from my synagogue. Or at least it was 20 minutes in *theory*.

In reality, that 20 minute walk often became a 30-40 minute guided tour of the neighborhood, with my son serving as the tour guide. As anyone who has spent time with little kids can attest, children have the ability to marvel at things that are part of the landscape that adults do not find to be remarkable, that we simply don't notice at all.

Imagine your own walk or drive for a moment. You might observe the more obvious things, like a new building that seems to have popped up out of nowhere, or the empty space where the house down the street used to be, the people dancing on the street corners

throwing the advertising signs in the air. Maybe you notice the Halloween decorations, the Christmas trees full of lights, or the giant Hanukkah bears and dreidels that pop as an attempt to compete with Christmas. What are the things that you would stop for, the ones that would make you want to take a closer look? How many are the more mundane, ordinary things?

As you know, our predecessors the rabbis were quite fond of blessings. There are the usual blessings for kiddush, hamotzi, lighting candles and other rituals that we say regularly. And there is a chapter of the tractate Berakhot that is devoted to blessings that one recites for events and phenomena in the natural world. For lightning, thunder and wind, one says *עוֹלָם מְלֵא וּגְבוּרָתוֹ שֶׁפָּחוּ בְרוּךְ* - Blessed is the One whose strength and might fills the world. For mountains,

hills, rivers and deserts, one says בְּרַאשִׁית מַעֲשֵׂה עוֹשֶׂה בְּרוּךְ - Blessed is the One who makes the works of creation. Upon seeing a beautiful tree, creature, or person, one says, בְּעוֹלָמוֹ לֹ שִׁכְחָה בְּרוּךְ. Blessed is the One who has such [beautiful things] in God's world. There is a specific blessing for rainbows, the Sea and a whole host of other moments in nature, even earthquakes. But here's the thing - the Mishnah specifies that such blessings are only to be recited if one experiences these things intermittently, which the rabbis of the Talmud explain to mean once in 30 days. That time constraint, strangely, creates some type of disconnect here. If these moments and events are so wondrous as to warrant a blessing, why should the frequency with which we encounter them negate our ability to express that wonder each and every time we experience them?

Now imagine your neighborhood walk through a child's eye. Does the observer in you notice the cycle of the tree leaves from their lush green state, as they turn first yellow then brown? Maybe you marvel at the different shapes and the crackling sounds that they make as you walk on them once they have fallen. You might wonder if the branches were lonely without their leaves, and whisper reassuringly that they would soon have new ones to replace their lost friends.

Walking under the bare trees, do you feel the warmth of the sun that hits you unobstructed by the leaves? Maybe you turn your face up toward the sun and find yourself squinting from the glare, as it hits the window on the second story of the imposing gray house with the oversized black door. You might wonder about the child who left the

bicycle laying on its side, in front of the house where the porch light was left on, its glow barely perceptible in the daylight.

The kaleidoscope of flowers along the path might stop you in your tracks, the purple flowers tinged with orange on one block, the fuchsia colored bougainvillea down the street, and the native plants on the corner house, each getting their moment of scrutiny as you crouch down to look at them up close, admiring the symmetry or lack thereof, feeling the velvety leaves and rough textures. Not knowing which flowers are fragrant, you stop to smell every one, noting that each does, in fact, have its own scent. Maybe you are a collector, and you reach out to pick the leaves and flowers to keep as souvenirs.

Most of us don't walk through the world this way anymore, but, as you can guess, this was my weekly experience with my youngest son.

While he would exclaim his wonder and remind me that the world is indeed quite beautiful, I would practice the art of patience that generally eluded me until parenthood forced me into it, and remind him to look forward while on his scooter - his head was perpetually turned sideways or backward, scanning the landscape for the next point of interest, or prolonging the moment with something he saw. He often fell, but fortunately, he turned those into new opportunities to inspect the gravel or insects crawling on the sidewalk.

I've come to realize that while my son and I were both walking on the same path, we were not actually on similar journeys. As I walked to synagogue, orienting each step toward my arrival, the streets and their beauty faded into the background, and remained shrouded behind my destination and sense of purpose.

My kid's purpose, on the other hand, was defined by what he saw and encountered in each moment. The newness. Sometimes the sameness. The attentiveness to minute differences. And that concentration to detail was an imperative to stop and see the divine within the myriad life that seemed hidden from my sight.

As you well know, we live in a world oriented toward productivity, where the number of hours in a day are far surpassed by the tasks and responsibilities that we feel required to do. We text while speaking on the phone, catch up on email while watching a video, and some of us - I'm not saying who - try to do one or more of these while driving. We switch our focus and attention from one thing to the next in rapid succession, maintaining the illusion that we are multitasking, when in fact scientists have demonstrated that our

efficiency and precision suffers as a consequence. We think that we are attuned to the things that matter, but we have rendered ourselves blind to the world around us, unable to see - or revel in - what we might otherwise call the mundane or the ordinary.

Perhaps this is why the rabbis of the Mishnah imposed the time constraint on the blessings for the natural world. They realized that we might fail to muster the awe and wonder that such blessings are meant to express.

In contrast, the stories of Abraham and Moses suggest that they shared a unique ability to notice and see the extraordinary within the ordinary. The rabbis attributed their selection as the progenitor of our people, and the leader who would guide the Israelites through the Exodus, to their ability to notice seemingly ordinary things along



their path. What they saw inspired their curiosity and set the course of their trajectory as leaders.

The story of our people begins with the words of God to Abraham, לְךָ אֶנִּי מְאֹרָצְךָ לְ. God calls upon Abraham to leave his homeland to embark on a path to an unknown destination, promising that a great nation will emerge from him. Understanding the great import of this moment, the rabbis ask why Abraham was selected by God.

In the midrash Genesis Rabbah, R. Yitzhak answers the question by way of a parable. “this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *bira doleket* - a castle aglow. He said, "Is it possible that there is no one to look after this castle? The owner of the building looked out and said, “I am the owner of the castle.”

R. Yitzhak explains that similarly, Abraham looked at the world and said, “is it possible that this world has no one to look after it?”

So what is it that Abraham sees? A closer look at the midrash reveals that the bira doleket - a castle aglow can mean one of two things. It is either a castle in flames, or a castle full of light. Did Abraham perceive a world of chaos and danger, suggesting the absence of God?

Or did he see a carefully designed world full of majesty, suggesting God’s presence?

The duality of meaning is, of course, not a coincidence. The rabbis keenly understood that the world often feels both orderly, and devoid of order, safe for some, yet dangerous for others, and that the world frequently suggests both the absence and the presence of the Divine, simultaneously.

*In God in Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote

“There are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of wonder, in moments of joy; [and] there are those who sense the ultimate question in moments of horror, in moments of despair. It is both the grandeur and the misery of living that makes [the human] sensitive to the ultimate question.”

Heschel maintains that both versions of the Bira Doleket exist simultaneously, not only as opportunities to connect with the divine, but beyond that, as a challenge to humans to do *something* with the feelings of awe, wonder, fear and despair.

God’s response to Abraham was a statement of presence rather than action. “I am the sovereign of the universe, go forth from this land to the place where I will show you.” As if to say, I am here, but the the

task is yours to fulfill. Abraham's response, and his charge, differs depending on what he sees.

We can imagine Abraham, standing at a distance, yearning to gain access to a castle full of light, a place of shelter along a path toward an unknown destination. If so, Abraham's task is to find a way in, to pave a path so that others can find refuge and access the light that he is uniquely able to see.

Or perhaps, Abraham stands at a distance watching in horror as the flames threaten to take over the castle and its inhabitants. In this case, his charge is to find a way to extinguish the fire and quell the flames, to usher the inhabitants of the castle to safety, to make sure that the fire and chaos does not spread.

When Abraham chooses to leave everything behind and walk with God, he understands that he is being called upon to both.

Like Abraham, Moses' journey begins with the act of seeing. Though Moses is safely ensconced within the palace walls, he foregoes his privilege, and sets out to see the plight of the Hebrews. He sees an Egyptian taskmaster mercilessly beating a slave. But rather than turn away from the horror, Moses acts, striking the taskmaster, and as a result, he is forced to flee to Midian where he becomes a shepherd for his father in law, Yitro.

While tending to his flock, Moses notices the curious sight of a bush that is aflame, yet remains unconsumed by the fire. As Arthur Strimling wrote in *Days of Gratitude*, "Moses notices, and in that

noticing ignites the engine of our entire history. How many other shepherds walked that way and either missed the bush or saw it was burning but didn't look long enough to see the miraculous in it?"

Moses is living in a time when the castle is in flames, and yet, he doesn't look away. It feels like we are living in a time when the entire world, not just the castle, is in flames. We feel the heat of the incendiary words slung by protesters and counter-protesters on college campuses, the inciteful speeches of demagogues, and the blaze of rockets that light up as bursts of fire in the sky, turning buildings and neighborhoods into rubble. Like us, Moses sees fire everywhere, but he doesn't look away. Rather, he turns toward the fire to get a closer look, and it is from within the flames that God calls out to him. Moses understands that God is both the cause of the Israelites'

enslavement, and their redeemer. The 12th century Spanish commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses saw the burning bush as a sign - that although the Israelites were suffering they would withstand the flames of oppression and not be consumed.

Sometimes the fire can also be a beacon of light.

And so, Moses sets on a path to lead the Israelites away from the flames, toward the promised land.

Like Abraham, Moses finds his destiny as a consequence of his willingness and ability to see things that others might have ignored.

In her commentary on Exodus, Dr Aviva Zornberg writes, “it’s a certain quality of the spirit that allows him to move away from the straight and narrow, as it were, from his own concerns, to simply notice an anomaly in the world, and to look for meaning in it.”

So what was this quality of spirit that made Moses and Abraham able to see what others did not, what we, most likely, would have missed? Perhaps their gift lies in the fact that they were outsiders, individuals who were willing to leave what they knew to chart a new path. The unknown disabusing them of the egotistical sense of self-importance - and the illusion of safety - forcing them to pay attention. Both are strangers in a strange land straddling dual identities - Chaldean and Aramean, Egyptian and Hebrew, caught between the person they once were, and the one they are in the process of becoming. Perhaps it is their ability to hold these multiple truths and embrace the possibility of change that makes them uniquely able to look into the places and things that are aglow, to turn toward the fire rather than away from it.



Abraham was a wanderer, and Moses, a shepherd. The wanderer understands that the world is full of castles on fire and castles aglow with light, and the shepherd understands that the presence of fire does not necessarily mean the end.

My dear ordinands, I have had the honor of teaching you, and privilege of learning with you and from you. What I have seen is that you are not so different from these two leaders. Each of you is a wanderer, having travelled your own paths toward this day. As wanderers, you have seen a world that is on fire and one that is full of light. You have seen the world as it is, and have pushed the needle toward making it what it could be. Your unique perspectives reflect your willingness to heed the words of children and those whose voices are often ignored, the *unwillingness* to see the world through a

binary lens, your capacity to sit in the discomfort of pain and suffering, and the moral courage to speak out, even at personal and professional expense. As a class, and as individuals, you have demonstrated the ability to hear and see what others have missed, to behold the world in ways that others do not.

Today you become shepherds. You have responded to the call of the rabbinate with the same word used by Abraham and Moses, *Hineini*.

They confronted the world with wonder and curiosity, and their mission began with the questions, why is it so? and does it have to be this way? Their legacy lies in their willingness to challenge the status quo, even if it means standing up to those in power - be it God or Pharaoh.

Like them, you are about to go forth on a journey with an unknown destination, understanding that you will encounter a world that will require much of you.

We are living in a time when the enormity of the climate crisis, and issues like poverty, racism, inequality, and the constant stream of attacks on our basic liberties and democracy, vie for attention with catastrophic death tolls, hostages and existential threats. The state of the world has rendered many of us in a state of paralysis, while others of us have found that the only way to withstand the undertow is to become willfully blind to what lies in front of us. For many, the horrors are inescapable, playing on a loop in our traumatized minds.

As Jews, the future feels uncertain, as if we are standing on a precipice without a clear path forward. We find ourselves defending

our right to exist, constrained to define our own experiences of hatred and isolation, and the relief brought by those who rise to our defense is short lived when it becomes clear that we are being objectified in service of an agenda that has nothing to do with us.

Internally, the fault lines within our communities have left many of our communal structures teetering on the verge of collapse.

Many of us feel like we are stuck in a castle on fire, desperate to find a way out, while others feel like outsiders, locked out of synagogues and shared spaces that were once castles of light.

The world is on fire, and it is up to you to bring us into the light.

At times you will be called upon to put out the flames, and at others you will have to create inroads to ensure that all people have the ability to find an entry point into the castle. Perhaps you will determine that the issue is the castle itself, and you will forego the fortified structure, opting to imagine a more expansive, sprawling Judaism that can contain and nourish those within, while honoring the life and dignity of all people.

As you walk along the path of your rabbinate, remember your purpose, but don't let the destination blind you to the remarkable people and things along the way. They are opportunities for you channel your experience of wonder - to do good, to bring justice to the world, help those in need find refuge, and to bring the light that is contained within the castle out into the world. Take the time to

see the wondrous beauty around you - the divine sparks that can be found in a patch of flowers, a small unremarkable bush in the midst of the desert, or the light reflected from a window in the distance, and remember to recite a blessing. In the words of T.S. Elliott, these are the “ visible reminders of Invisible Light”

Mazal tov.