

Walk in the Footsteps of Abraham

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By Rabbi Stuart Gershon

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We live in anxious and disorienting times. Our modern life is characterized by rapid change and profound uncertainty.

As New York Times columnist Frank Rich observed, the political rage displayed by angry folks at town-hall meetings this summer reflected far more than angst over health care.

Rich writes, “It’s the economy, the fact that millions of people have lost their jobs and millions of others are afraid of losing theirs...so is fear of more home foreclosures and credit card bankruptcies. So is fear of China, whose economic ascension stands in stark contrast to the collapse of traditional American industries from automobiles to newspapers. So is fear of Barack Obama, whose political ascension dramatizes the coming demographic order that will relegate whites to the American minority.”

Modern life is about coping with anxiety and fear – fear about the state of the world and anxiety about the future of our country. Modern life is about managing uncertainty in so many dimensions of our personal lives. Modern life is all about making decisions and taking action despite uncertainty.

But let’s not scare ourselves. Instead, let’s gather perspective. Yes we crave certainty, but not much in life is really certain anyway, except for death and taxes. The way I look at, managing uncertainty is just another definition of parenting. Until I became a father, I never really appreciated the meaning of uncertainty! You just never know for sure whether or not you are doing the right thing or the wrong thing by your kids. Only time will tell.

Certainty is also overrated. Feelings of certainty can lead to arrogance. How many times have you felt absolutely one hundred percent certain of your position, only to find out later that you were wrong? Well, it’s certainly happened to me on more than one occasion. And, as Rabbi Irwin Kula observes, most of life’s pleasures emerge from uncertainty, from not-knowing. Kula writes, “Most of us deeply desire and celebrate the fruits of uncertainty without realizing that without the seed, the fruit would not exist. Discovery, revelation, insight, love, surprise, joy: we would never have these wonderful human experiences if we didn’t allow ourselves to feel unsure, to embark upon journeys without needing to know where we will end up.” Uncertainty can be thrilling and exciting. Uncertainty adds spice to life.

What wisdom does Judaism, our wisdom tradition, teach us about managing fear, anxiety, and coping with uncertainty? It's fascinating to note that seventy five percent of all the debates in the Talmud are left unresolved. No final decision is ever reached. The Talmud teaches an important lesson here. Not even the application of the most rigorous logic guarantees a definitive answer. Hardly anything is certain.

Our patriarch Abraham knew something about uncertainty and fear. Elected by God to be the founder of a new religion and a new people, Abraham left everything he knew with certainty to follow God's call. We read in Genesis, chapter 12, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." Yes, Abraham heard God's call. But Abe had no idea where he was going.

Why did God choose Abraham? Why did Moses also heed God's call? Both Abraham and Moses held one particular quality in common: neither one was seduced by the need for certainty. Moses and Abraham could function without it.

The famous narrative of the twelve scouts is also very instructive. The Hebrews are poised on the banks of the Jordan river about to enter the land of Israel. Functioning as an advance reconnaissance team, twelve scouts – one man from each of the 12 tribes – are sent by Moses to check out the Promised Land. They are to report on the nature of the land and the people who live there. So the scouts move north from the wilderness of Paran, they see the Negev region and climb the Judean hills. Forty days and forty nights later they return to Moses with their report. As you might expect, they say: we have good news and we have bad news.

The good news is that the land of Israel is a beautiful land, lush and fertile, flowing with "milk and honey." The bad news is that the indigenous peoples in the land of Canaan are huge and powerful, and we do not believe we are strong enough to defeat them. In comparison to the size of the Anakites, the scouts said, we are as little as grasshoppers. How do the Hebrews react to this news? I think it's fair to say not well! The people panic. They are so frightened that they are prepared to stone Moses and Aaron and return to Egypt under different leadership – a coup. The people are so spooked that they would prefer the cozy familiarity of slavery to the unknown rewards of freedom.

God hears all this and is understandably very disappointed. The Hebrews are abandoning their mission. The Hebrews' behavior leads God to a new realization. God took the Hebrews out of slavery. But God was not able to take slavery out of the Hebrews. So God decides that the plan to give the land of Israel to the Hebrews must wait for 40 years – until the children of the current generation grow up. God reasons that the children, having been born into freedom, will possess the necessary confidence and self-esteem to inherit the Promised Land.

So now you know the true reason why the Hebrews wandered in the desert wilderness for 40 years. It wasn't because it took 40 years to get from Egypt to Israel. And it wasn't because Moses, like most men, refused to ask for directions!

The narrative of the twelve scouts teaches that life necessarily involves facing the unknown, taking risks, living with uncertainty. The story of the twelve scouts is a magnificent cautionary tale about what happens when we cave in to our fears, when we can't manage uncertainty, when we are too scared to take a risk. What happens is we don't get to enter the Promised Land. What happens is we don't get what we most want out of life. The story of the twelve scouts teaches us that we must not "scale down our dreams to the size of our fears" (Kula).

I conclude with this final word, hopefully one of inspiration. Yes, we live in anxious and disorienting times. Modern life is characterized by rapid change and profound uncertainty. Uncertainty is the wave of the present and the future. That wasn't the inspirational part. This is the inspirational part. And we will be fine. We will be just fine because we will walk in the footsteps of Abraham. We will approach the unknown as an adventure. We will manage life's uncertainties with humor and humility. We will take necessary risks with courage. We will face our fears head on and overcome them. Everything will be okay because we can proudly say, "I...I walk in the footsteps of Abraham."