

A few weeks ago I came back home late at night after teaching a class, and intended to unwind by zoning in front of a TV show for a while. Little did I know that I'd find myself working some more; for the evolution of this talk sprang from the TV show I *thought* I was going to relax to. I had caught a rerun of an episode of House.

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the show, Dr. House is this *obnoxious* genius diagnostician with a *gigantic* ego, whose identity is *exclusively* defined by what he does. Dr. House is off-the-charts brilliant and complex, and is rather known for always telling people what he thinks, for better... or for worse.

In short: I *really* like him!

The episode begins with Dr. House entertaining likely diagnoses of a patient with an enlarged tongue. As his students offer possible explanations for the illness, a man walks into the room, pulls a gun on House, and shoots him.

Next scene, Dr. House wakes up following surgery. His interns, gathered around his bed, tell him that the bullets missed his vital organs, and that he would recover in no time. Without missing a beat, House picks up exactly where they had left off, asking about the mysterious case of the man with the enlarged tongue.

As the day progresses, House begins to experience hallucinations. It takes him several incidents to begin realizing what is actually happening to him because his visions are inherently plausible, yet somehow larger than life at the same time. And although they seem sensible and internally consistent, eventually House detects something is off; things are just a bit out of whack—off kilter—abnormal. When the visions multiply, House comes to suspect that something might have gone wrong during surgery which is now causing these hallucinations. In the meantime the tongue patient's case goes from bad to worse. Other parts of his body begin to shut down, and the interns are at a loss. From his bedside, House guides them to try different procedures, but

the patient keeps deteriorating. In parallel, House's hallucinations become increasingly frequent to the point where he begins to question the reality of his interactions with his own students and, for that matter, the reality of most of his experiences. House is caught; prisoner of his own delusional mind, unable to tell the difference between his visions and his reality.

Now you might be thinking: "What on earth is the rabbi talking about? And what does this have to do with *anything*?" Great question! The passage in Torah that you just heard chanted, the *Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham, is one of the many stories which make up the Torah portion called "*Vayera*;" meaning: "And he saw" OR "And he had visions." This theme of vision, in fact, dominates the portion. Eighteen times we find allusions to "seeing," throughout the text; almost half of which are found in this passage of the "Binding of Isaac" alone. I submit that if we allow ourselves to move past the literal words in the text, *we shall see* that, in fact, this portion is chock full of just that—visions—as hinted at by the name of the portion itself. Therefore, as I watched, it struck me that this episode of House, full of visions and extremes, not only mirrors Abraham's process but gives us a key to unlock yet another possible doorway in order to understand what is going on in this challenging story.

Like House, Abraham, too, undergoes severe trauma. Just a few verses before our portion begins, God had ordered him, at the advanced age of 99, to circumcise himself. Rashi (the *other* French Torah commentator- died in 1105,) reminds us here that our portion, *Vayera*, begins on the third day after Abraham's self-inflicted procedure, when the pain is said to be at its peak. So, given this circumstance, can we understand any of the stories that lead up to Isaac's binding on a literal level? Did Abraham really "see" three Angels? Did one of them really predict that Sarah—now 90 years old—was to give birth to Isaac? How about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? And did God truly order Abraham to send his first born son, Ishmael, to die in the wilderness? What was real? What was hallucination? In the biblical world of Abraham, like for House, these events are inherently plausible, yet larger than life at the same time. They may

seem sensible and internally consistent, but Abraham begins to suspect, as well, that things are just a bit out of whack, abnormal. How is it that God—we might imagine Abraham reasoning—would destroy two entire cities despite the bargain he had worked out with Him? Yet Abraham suspends his disbelief. But the absurdity continues. God then condones sending off Ishmael to a certain death in the wilderness. Abraham can't abide by this, yet God reassures Abraham that Ishmael, too, will be a great nation and, Abraham, needing to believe, complies. Here, Abraham denies his own perspective, his own inner knowing, surrendering his better judgment to a voice claiming greater authority, giving up his personal power to an entity outside of himself asserting broader knowledge. How many of us have lived through these kinds of illusions? Presented with promises of change, of better health, wealth, power, or happiness we, too, go along, in the fog of our delusion. We give up our power, believe in empty promises; are willing to be infantilized as long as we are told what to do, wanting so much to be convinced that it will all turn out for the best. And so we send away our Ishmael: our money, our resources, our hopes with a promise that they too, will become great. But it is our faith that is shaken in the process.

Abraham's faith, too, is shaken, and distrust creeps in. In such a moment of doubt, House's self-talk echoes what I imagine to be Abraham's own analysis. House reasons that when something doesn't make sense, when what we know to be real is challenged, one of our assumptions, inescapably, has to be wrong. What if, he posits, the faulty assumption is that it *is* real?

Abraham, like House, begins to snap out of his traumatic stupor, and realizes that, perhaps, it is not just fragments of reality that his trauma has turned into hallucinations; perhaps reality as a whole and all the characters in it, *is* but a never ending illusion. House continues his reasoning realizing that as long as the delusion makes sense his mind lets it go on. He has to make it *not* make sense. He has to push it past the point where it can no longer trick his mind—where the delusion can't live comfortably anymore—for it to unravel.

The *Akedah*, as illusion, is a blueprint for such a process of spiritual awakening and personal growth. It is a process which begins in the moment our faith in our reality is shaken, when we suddenly find that it no longer makes sense. The illusion no longer works. Right then and there, we know that things have got to change, that we cannot continue to delude ourselves. Whatever the subject matter, it is a time in our life akin to “hitting rock bottom.” Something has gone wrong; the pieces in that specific aspect of our life do not fit together anymore. Our inner beliefs no longer match our outer reality and *that* is no longer tenable. Only then are we compelled to change.

At this juncture, two paths open up before us. One path leads to fear, denial, and repression. We rationalize our experience, deny its incongruence, recreate our illusion in a way that will, once again, make sense to the mind, and resume the illusory life we know and is comfortable; unchanged, unmoved, un-evolved. That is, until the same recurring issue trips us up once again. I marvel at the ways we are able to fake ourselves out. We often use the very tools, the very knowledge we have, against our better judgment and in support of keeping ourselves stuck in our delusions. The ego is so afraid of change that it will use every tool in its arsenal to maintain these illusions, even if that means perpetuating our living in pain and suffering. Beyond that, it will do its utmost to defend these illusions and project t onto others the anger, the guilt and the shame it feels after having been found out.

Beyond the ego’s fear of change is another component which stops us from engaging in a transformative process that would free us from our illusions: the unwillingness to face the enormous amount of personal work that goes together with the second path. For this second path is long, fierce, tumultuous, and uncompromising. This path forces us to face our demons head on; it moves us *through* our limitations, and not around them. It is a path which confronts us, leaving no illusory stone unturned. It is a path which does not allow for rationalization, denial or repression. We fearlessly look inside to identify that with which we are struggling, to

find that which sets us back time and again, the obstacle which keeps tripping us up. This relentless process helps us *to get clear*; to get clear about whatever it is that is hindering our growth. We uncover the stories we are telling ourselves about that recurring problem which holds us back. We stay with it until we find out where it is coming from, until we are able to understand where it was, or from whom, that we learned what we know about it. We bring light to the negative messages we have incorporated that have become second nature, those unconscious assumptions. We engage in this process so that we can move past our obstacle, so that we can transcend the assumptions that keep us stuck and be liberated from making the same mistakes over and over again.

But, of course, this kind of personal work is neither sexy, nor quick. It requires on-going dedication to self-awareness and the willingness to carry the process through the darkest of places until it releases its blessing. Like for House and Abraham, this path pushes us past the point where the illusion can no longer trick our mind.

This happens, in both our stories in very similar ways. In fact, the parallels between the two as they reach their final moments are truly incredible (unless the House writers had Abraham in mind.) Of course, because these stories aim at making a point that will stay with their audience, their ending are as dramatic as they are extreme. And like every birthing story, they come with violent contractions.

House enters the surgery room where his interns are about to begin the procedure on his patient. House knows he is hallucinating. He also figured out that only an outrageous and nonsensical act would cause his mind to snap out of its hallucinating trap. The patient is there, bound on the surgery table; like Isaac on the altar atop the wood. House approaches the surgeon's table where all the tools are laid out. He moves to stab his patient but at the last moment, an intern intervenes. House argues with his team—the life-like people living in his head. He knows that the only way to reclaim his self is to go all the way, and, with his

hallucinations looking on, like Abraham, goes for it again, this time succeeding in murdering his patient.

You object, however, Abraham did not go through with Isaac's sacrifice! Yet many commentators, going back to the Middle-Ages, argue that he did. Here is a verse that points to such an interpretation. Upon receiving God's blessing, the Torah says: "Abraham then returned to his servants..." Abraham alone is mentioned. He is the only one to come down from Mount Moriah. Isaac is nowhere to be seen. But of course Isaac is nowhere to be seen! He was never there in the first place! As Abraham breaks through the spell of his visions, he at last, wakes up back where it all started, at the place he never left, in Beer Sheva. And as our TV show concludes, the shock of having killed off his patient causes House to snap out of his delusional mind as well, as he, too, finds himself where it all began, being rushed through the hallways of the hospital, tied down to a gurney, bleeding from the gunshot wounds he had just sustained.

We know that life doesn't happen the way it reads in Torah or plays out in movies. There are far less special effects and high drama to our everyday life. The story of Abraham is, nonetheless, compelling. Our inner Abraham is calling us to see through our illusions; to not turn away from them, but rather to get to the core of what animates them. His character's odyssey shows us that it is through the death of our illusions that we can be reborn, free from the husks of ego which mask the bright inner Divine light yearning to shine forth from the center of our Being. The story of the *Akedah* is the blueprint for a process of breaking through these illusions, the story of a birth; and when it comes to birth, we all know this, the only way out... is through.

May we find the courage to move through and birth our Selves again and again.