

Just days before Rosh HaShanah, I tuned in to watch Machmud Abbas' speak at the United Nations to ask for Palestine to be recognized as a State. Abbas, for those of you who may not know, is the President of the Palestinian National Authority. As I saw him walk up to the podium there was a part of me that was hopeful; hopeful that his gesture of courage and determination on behalf of his people could bring about a breakthrough in the stalled peace process; hopeful that he would extend an olive branch toward Israel on this momentous day; that he would somehow hint at recognizing Israel's right to exist as a sovereign Jewish State alongside a Palestinian State. And there was also a part of me that was concerned that his talk might turn into an Israel bashing monologue. Alas, my hopes were quickly dashed and my concerns justified... Nonetheless, I listened to his story. I listened to his truth. I heard the pain and suffering of his people, I heard the sadness and the despair, *and* I heard his vengeful angry tones as well.

Then, a few minutes later, came Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister. It was his turn to give his speech in front of the Assembly. I was hopeful that he would take the high road and open his hand in peace to the Palestinians: commend them on their courageous stance and commit to ordering a freeze of all West Bank settlements, the dismantlement of the illegal ones, and a halt on any construction in East Jerusalem as a gesture of good will and a serious commitment to peace. I was also afraid that *his* talk would turn into a Palestine bashing monologue. Again, I was disappointed. But I listened to *his* story, and I heard the fear, the distrust, the profound sense of betrayal, together with a mix of arrogance and superiority.

As I listened to both stories, it felt as if these two people lived in parallel universes. Their respective narratives were powerfully logical and, *they believed*, their argument airtight. From

their vantage point they both spoke a truth, but neither of them had a monopoly on it. If I could crudely sum up what I heard beyond the words themselves was that, for the Israelis, all Palestinians are unrepentant terrorists hell-bent on the total destruction of Israel; and, for the Palestinians, Israelis are governed by a brutal apartheid regime whose goal is to oppress the Palestinians and rob them of their homeland. This is each side's experience of reality and, from their perspective, everything in their experience justifies this way of thinking about the other. Each side is bound by its own narrative, tied to perpetuating it. Each story is so compelling that it leaves no room for rational thinking and they can't help but read every act or declaration from the other side through the prism of their own restrictive narrative. The righteousness of each story is so intoxicating that, in a lot of ways, both sides have become hopelessly addicted to them, bound by their own self-imposed restrictions that they cannot perceive.

Not coincidentally, the story we just heard is about just that—*Akedah*—“binding.” Although, at first glance, it would seem that it is only Isaac who is bound; in taking a closer look we find that, in truth, the binding of Isaac is just an outer manifestation, the ultimate consequence of the internal binding of his father. In fact, Abraham's entire system is held hostage to his singular vision. Like the Israelis and the Palestinians today, Abraham is bound to a storyline; and to be more precise, in his case, a promise turned into a singular pathological obsession.

How has it come to this?!?

“*Lech Lecha!*” God said to Abraham, “Go forth!... I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great... I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you; through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed...I will give the land [of

Canaan] to your descendants... forever... I will give you an abundant reward... and make your seed as numerous as the stars of the sky... “

How does one resist such a powerful promise coming from God? What ego is able to withstand such pronouncement and remain grounded? The rabbis argue that, everything in his life reflects Abraham's unshakable faith in God, including his near-sacrifice of his son. I submit that, instead, everything in Abraham's life is a reflection of his narcissistic pursuit of the dream that God promised, that Abraham became intoxicated by the idea of such a promise, addicted to the story God had foretold. A careful reading of the unfolding of his life from this moment forward suggests that Abraham displays destructive behaviors indistinguishable from those of an addict. Abraham is bound and determined to make this story come true. But at what cost?

After hearing God's promise, at age 75, Abraham gives up all that he owns, leaves his birthplace, his family, his entire life behind, and with his wife, Sarah, and his nephew, Lot, embarks on a elusive journey to an unknown place. But the journey soon degrades into one hardship after another. They suffer through a major famine in Canaan and then take refuge in Egypt. There, to save his own life and with apparent complete disregard for his wife, Abraham gives Sarah over to Pharaoh, who, believing Abraham's claim that she is his sister, “took her as a wife” to use the biblical euphemism. One might suspect that Sarah's not so happy with him.

He goes on to alienate his nephew. He abruptly terminates his relationship with Lot, because —the rabbis explain—he was concerned he would have to divvy up the Promised Land with Lot and his descendents. But Abraham doesn't stop at alienating only family. Indeed, at the age of 99, when God orders Abraham to circumcise himself and his entire clan, he personally sees to it. But his reckless decisions don't end there. Now, further eroding what is left of his

marriage, once *again*(!), to spare his own life, Abraham gives Sarah over to another king, King Abimelech. And as we know, not even his progeny are safe from Abraham's moral recklessness. He sends off his son Ishmael and Hagar to die in the wilderness. And to top it all off, Abraham readily complies when God orders him to sacrifice Isaac—the son he had with Sarah—and whom he had waited, literally, for an entire century.

The cost to Abraham and to the people around him of his fanatic commitment to his story is truly devastating. He is willing to sacrifice everything and everybody of import in pursuit of his singular obsession. Now, in the aftermath of the *Akedah*, Abraham's relationship with his son is utterly and irreversibly shattered. We read that, after the near-sacrifice episode, Abraham comes down Mount *Moriah* alone. Isaac and Abraham will never see each other again.

With the *Akedah*, as a result of his external and internal *binds*, Abraham loses Sarah, as well. When God commands him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham steals away early in the morning, so as to not have to face her. Upon Abraham's return, Sarah has died, with the *Midrash*—rabbinic story commentary—reporting that her soul left her body after hearing that Abraham had taken her son to be sacrificed. Abraham then buys the only piece of property he will ever own in the “Promised Land;” a small field with a burial cave where he lays Sarah to rest. Where does that leave Abraham's life and his story? Not much to show for, but a devastated landscape of shattered relationships and a minuscule plot of land.

What is going on here? Why is Abraham seduced into complacency? Why doesn't he protest? Where is the Abraham of the Sodom and Gomorrah story who challenges God to spare the lives of strangers? How can any potential payoff in the future justify such a high human cost? I have witnessed this scenario play out for people in my life too. There were times when the

promises of reward, the potential fulfillment of a long yearned-for dream, eclipsed their abilities to remain conscious of the dark shadows attached to the packet. Lacking even a shred of awareness of how blindly attached to their stories they had become, they ignored the warning signs, were quick to believe the excuses of others, were even quicker to rationalize their own decisions even when they led them further down a potentially destructive path. I watched them pointing the finger at others; telling everybody they had it all wrong, that they didn't know what *they* knew. The more they defended their story the more they found themselves bound to it. Their story became the quicksand where they were losing themselves. In the end, they too lost a few precious relationships, ended up depleted, and energetically spent. What seduces us to that singularly focused place? Money? Power? Fame? What is it for you? At what cost do we hold on to our stories? It truly behooves us to get present to the impact. When we feel into it deeply for ourselves, we can't help but to conclude that when we are unconsciously married to our stories, we are at risk of losing our humanity along the way. Abraham did just that. Inescapably lost in his own narrative, he remained oblivious to the pain he was causing around him and, eventually, loses everything to it.

I see Abbas and Netanyahu and through them, their respective peoples, caught in the same paradigm that originated with their—with our—common ancestor. Each side stuck, bound to a path of destruction in the self-righteous name of their own exclusive narrative, oblivious to the violence and deaths that inevitably follow in their wake. It seems that Abraham's legacy was not only the promise of the One God, but that this pattern of potential enslavement to our own narrative is one that all of us have inherited. So what are the beliefs, the positions *we* are wedded to in our own lives? What are the stories we are bound to that are reflected by the resentments, the upsets, and the anger, we experience when these stories are challenged? What is it we know

ourselves to be so “right” about that we are unable to hear a different perspective, a different point of view?

One of my favorite authors, Ken Wilber, asserts: “As a general rule, no one is smart enough to be wrong 100% of the time.” We have to leave room for the other to be wrong only 99% of the time, because in this 1% lies a world of possibilities. By allowing that 1% we open a door to hearing a different perspective; we start with the assumption that there are no absolute truths but, rather, many relative truths; that there is no given reality but only perspectives on that reality.

How do we get ourselves to this 1%? How do we make our embedded stories conscious enough to begin to shift? How do we coax our ego out of hiding? How to un-bind? A key presented itself in a rather unlikely place—a yoga class.

In any given class Yogi Michael is likely to offer this enthusiastic instruction: **Keep everything!** Students get into specific asanas, yoga postures, and then, as he comes around to check, tells “OK, now **keep everything!**” He then offers gentle adjustments, and pretty soon—without quite noticing—from “Keep everything” you’ve shifted *everything*. Yoga is essentially about un-binding, allowing energies to flow, loosening restrictions and tightening. Most of us are usually not aware of how tight we are until a gentle shifting occurs that loosens it all. You started out in your asana, working, but comfortable—complacently aligned—or so you thought. Think again. Shift everything. Now **that’s** what true alignment feels like. That “**Keep everything!**” skillfully assuages the ego—makes it feel good and safe. Now it can be coaxed into doing the challenging work. True spiritual practice is a process by which you are able to, gently and incrementally, slightly move yourself out of position. By moving out of our entrenched positions

we not only become better able to see or hear the other's position, but we become better able to see our own self, our own stories objectively. We don't need to doubt and question everything all at once; we just need to allow ourselves to shift our perspective just enough, to move out of our ego position just enough, that an opening is able to materialize; a crack in the *klippot*—the shells around our heart— is allowed to appear. And as the process unfolds, one slight shift at a time, more and more of our rigid beliefs, our narrow narratives, come into question and our hearts open up. We become more understanding, more inclusive, and more compassionate toward others and toward ourselves. This place of dissonance is a very healthy place to be in. It is a place that allows for real growth, for real opening to happen, for real learning to take place, and for more loving energies to flow through us as we find ourselves more aligned with the Source of Being.

But Abraham had no gentle guide to know how tightly he was bound. And the legacy of this shared story of boundedness remains with us to this day. Israelis and Palestinians, too, have been stuck for many decades in their respective narratives. The cost to both people is that to remain enmeshed in these intransigent stories is to perpetuate the cycle of misery and collective nightmare that they/we co-create. Perhaps a real peace process might get underway when neither side expects the other to accept the *totality* of its story any longer, but when each is able to shift its perspective slightly and acknowledge a truth of just one aspect, a sliver, 1% of the other's narrative. Perhaps this is our work this year as well: 1) to become aware of our entrenched attachment to our stories, 2) to question our assumptions, and 3) gently allow ourselves to open our heart to different perspectives; three aspects of potentially profound personal transformation. So **keep everything!** But align yourself with the possibility of taking multiple perspectives, and soon you will find that — like in the *Ribono Shel Olam* prayer—you will be less and less bound

by the patterns which cause pain to you and to others; that your words, your thoughts, your meditations and your acts will flow from the Fullness, the Wholeness that is the Source of your being.