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Beth Emet
THE FREE SYNAGOGUE
1224 Dempster Street, Evanston, Illinois 60202
847.869.4230 | bethemet.org

ROSH HASHANAH 5786/2025: Crossing Thresholds

Rabbi Andrea London

There's a midrash about Abraham that's so well-known, so deeply embedded in Jewish consciousness, that many people assume it's actually from the Torah. Young Abraham is tending his father Terah's idol shop when he smashes all the statues except the largest one and places the hammer in the hands of the one remaining idol. When Terah discovers the destruction and demands an explanation, Abraham innocently suggests that the big idol must have destroyed all the others. "Don't be ridiculous," his father responds, "idols can't move or act!" And Abraham, the snarky teenager, delivers the punch line: "Then why do you worship them?" A biblical mic drop, as it were.[1]

It's a wonderful story (even though it doesn't appear in the Torah itself) that captures an essential truth about Abraham's character and our children's knack for challenging the dogma we sometimes treat as, well, Torah from Sinai.

Our ancestors created this midrash because they understood something that needed explaining: that Abraham picks up and leaves his home in Ur based on a divine promise. Who does that?! The answer, this midrash tells us, is that Abraham is an iconoclast–literally, a breaker of icons. Think about it: if Abraham weren't already an iconoclast, a challenger of conventional thinking, why would he have listened when God called to him, "Lech lecha"—go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house?

[1] Genesis Rabbah 38

This midrashic Abraham—the iconoclast, the questioner—helps us understand the Abraham we meet in the Torah, where he is described as an "Ivri"—a Hebrew. This is the first biblical use of the term Ivri, a word that comes from the root ayin-vet-resh–or *avar*–meaning "to cross over." Abraham is literally "the one who crosses over," the one who distinguishes himself from the idol worshipers of his day to walk with God. He's a boundary crosser by nature, someone who stands at thresholds and chooses to step through them.

When God calls Abraham in Genesis 12, God doesn't just say "Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house." The verse continues: "to the land that I will show you"—*asher ar'eka*. Not "to the land I'm showing you right now" or "to the land I've already revealed to you." I will show you. Future tense. Abraham has to begin the journey without knowing the destination. Even without a known destination, he is told only the purpose of his journey in two brief words: *Heyah bracha*—be a blessing.

Think about what that means. Abraham is being asked to leave everything certain and familiar based on a promise of revelation that hasn't happened yet. He has to trust that in the process of walking, in the act of crossing boundaries and leaving the known world behind, God will show him where he's supposed to go. The destination will become clear only through the journey itself. Abraham doesn't get a roadmap—he gets a relationship and a promise that the path will become visible as he walks on it.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we read about the ultimate test of that threshold-crossing journey—the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Here, God really ups the ante. Not only is Abraham told to go on a journey without a clear map. Now, he is asked to sacrifice his beloved son, the child of promise who supposedly represents the future of everything God had pledged to him.

But let's be honest about Abraham's journey up to this point, because it's been complicated from the very beginning. He arrives in the land of Canaan and almost immediately discovers there's a famine. He and Sarah, his wife, have to flee to Egypt for survival. When they arrive in Egypt, Abraham tells Sarah to say she's his sister rather than his wife because he fears that if the Egyptians know she's married, they'll kill him to take her (since she was very beautiful). Once back in Canaan, there's the painful triangle relationship between Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, the mother of Abraham's eldest child, jealousy and resentment that leads to Hagar's banishment—twice. Abraham gives in to Sarah's demands even though it means casting out his eldest child, Ishmael.

This is our patriarch? This is the father of our faith? A man who lies when he's afraid, who banishes his own son and concubine to keep peace in his household?

And now, in Genesis 22, our Torah portion for today, this same flawed, complicated human being prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac, through whom all of God's promises were supposed to be fulfilled.

I've often wished that Abraham had protested when God called for him to sacrifice Isaac, like he did when he argued with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, saying: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth rule justly?"

Before we judge too hastily, though, let me ask you this: Is it possible that Abraham lived in a time when child sacrifice was commonplace, and he heard God's call differently than we hear it today? However we understand Abraham's reasons for preparing to sacrifice Isaac, what is remarkable is that he doesn't follow through. According to the Torah, an angel calls out from heaven pointing out another option: a ram in a nearby thicket. Abraham shows that the most important quality he possesses is that he's willing to change his mind when confronted with new information. He is not static. He continues to grow. His faith is dynamic.

This is precisely why Abraham remains our model. He teaches us that crossing thresholds and responding to God requires the courage to remain open to new insights and, if necessary, to change course.

The rabbis created the clever midrash about Abraham smashing his father's idols because they needed to explain why Abraham would abandon everything for an unknown destination. This story, however, is not in the Torah. What if the Torah's silence is intentional? What if the point is precisely that Abraham wasn't marked by some unique spiritual DNA that the rest of us lack? The text suggests that Abraham's greatness lay not in his starting point, but in his response. When called to journey into the unknown - "to the land that I will show you" - he went.

This reading makes Abraham's story not the exception but the template. His willingness to leave the familiar, to trust in a promise not yet fulfilled, to walk by faith rather than sight - these become universal human possibilities rather than the province of a spiritual elite. His journey becomes our journey. His calling is our calling.

There's another midrash I want to share with you, one that gets to the heart of what Abraham's story teaches us about what it means to be Ivrim–boundary crossers–people who stand up and stand out.

The rabbis tell us that Abraham was walking one day when he saw a palace. But they offer two interpretations of what he witnessed. In one version, the palace was *doleket*—burning, consumed by flames of suffering and injustice. The building is burning, the world is filled with pain, and Abraham can't just walk by. He calls out, "Is there no one in charge of this palace?"

And God responds, "I am the owner of this palace." Abraham's journey begins with seeing a world in flames and feeling compelled to do something about it.[2]

But in another version, that same word *doleket* means brilliantly illuminated, radiating light and beauty. In this version, the world is magnificent and wondrous, filled with possibility and hope. Again Abraham calls out, "Who is the owner of this palace?" And again God answers, "I am."

Two completely different visions of the same moment. A world on fire. A world filled with light. Which one did Abraham really see?

The answer is both. And that's exactly the point.

This is the threshold Abraham teaches us to cross—not from darkness to light or light to darkness, but into the mature faith that can hold both simultaneously. This is what Rosh Hashanah teaches us. This is what it means to be boundary crossers, to be Ivrim—Hebrews. We have to hold both truths at once—the pain and the possibility, the heartbreak and the hope, the burning and the illumination.

So how do we apply this ancient wisdom to the thresholds we face today? Look around our world today - how can we not see the palace in flames? Wars rage, hatred spreads, and divisions seem to grow deeper every year. The climate crisis threatens our children's future. Rising antisemitism makes Jews fear for their safety, while accusations of antisemitism are weaponized to silence dissent, defund universities, and target political opponents. Democracy erodes in places where we thought it was secure. Hamas continues to hold starving hostages in dark tunnels, and the Israeli army makes Gaza unliveable while thousands of innocents are killed with no end in sight. Sometimes it feels like everything is burning.

But if that's all we see, we'll despair. We'll give up. We'll stop trying to be a blessing, which is what Abraham and we are called to be.

Because the palace is also filled with light. There's beauty in this world that takes your breath away. There's kindness that emerges in the darkest moments. There are people who risk everything to save strangers. There's love that endures through the worst circumstances. There are communities like ours that gather to comfort each other and work for justice. There are young people who refuse to accept the broken world we're handing them and are determined to fix it.

Rosh Hashanah calls us to see both the burning and the light. To acknowledge the reality of suffering without becoming paralyzed by it. To celebrate the beauty of life without becoming complacent about injustice. This is the threshold we must cross as we enter this new year.

[2] Genesis Rabbah 39:1

As Abraham's descendants, we are called to be boundary crossers. Not people who retreat into comfortable certainties, but people who step up and stand out, who challenge ourselves to continue growing and to do what's right even when—especially when—it's difficult.

The journey is messy. Abraham's story teaches us that. He makes mistakes. He's afraid sometimes. He doesn't always choose the most courageous path. But he keeps walking. He keeps listening. He keeps trying to be faithful to the vision of blessing he was called to embody. This is the model we are called to emulate—not perfection, but persistence in the face of our own limitations.

We can see this same pattern of growth through struggle in the world today.

Take the example of Derek Black. His father founded Stormfront, the internet's first major white supremacist forum, and his stepfather was former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke. As a teenager, Derek Black spoke at white nationalist conferences and was considered an articulate spokesperson and future leader for the movement.

His transformation began in college, where he initially kept his background secret. Then he came to know some Jewish students and even attended some Shabbat dinners at the invitation of a Jewish student. This created opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building. His studies in medieval history also exposed him to rigorous methodology that made him question the pseudo-historical claims of white nationalist ideology.

In 2013, Black publicly renounced white nationalism, estranging himself from his family and the movement. He later earned a PhD in medieval history and has written about his experience.

Black's transformation took years and required people willing to maintain relationships with him despite his hateful views, showing the importance of not immediately writing off those involved in hate movements. When I think of Derek Black's story it gives me hope in a time when we see so much hatred and intolerance in our world. His example shows us that crossing over to stand for what is good and right is possible with encouragement, support and education. And if Derek Black can change, so can we.

Let's return to God's original call to Abraham ten chapters earlier in Genesis 12. Remember that God doesn't tell Abraham where his journey will lead him. God just promises to show Abraham the way—*Asher Areka (*that I will show you). To see what God is showing us requires attunement, openness, and the ability to adjust course when we are confronted with changed circumstances and new information. This is what it means to live a life of blessing. This is what it means to cross thresholds with wisdom and courage.

Ten days from now, on Yom Kippur morning, we'll read these words from Deuteronomy: "Choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Choose life—a life of blessing—as we prepare to cross the threshold into the promised future.

We are about to cross into 5786 together. We don't know what this year will bring. We can't control all the forces that will shape our world. But we can choose how we'll walk this threshold-crossing journey together.

We can choose to see only the palace in flames and become consumed by anger and despair. We can choose to see only the palace filled with light and become complacent about suffering. Or we can choose the harder path Abraham chose—seeing both, holding both, and refusing to let either vision prevent us from answering the call to be a blessing.

Abraham's journey continues in each of us. Every day we face our own "lech lecha" moments—calls to leave something familiar behind, to cross a threshold we're not sure we're ready for. The death of a loved one that forces us to reimagine our lives. A career change that demands we trust in our unknown potential. A relationship that asks us to become more vulnerable than feels safe. A call to challenge systems of oppression and injustice that we once saw as inevitable or essential. These are the thresholds that define our life's journey.

During these High Holy Days, I want to explore what it means for us to be *Ivrim*—boundary crossers like Abraham. How do we cross the thresholds before us, both personal and communal? What wisdom does our tradition offer about growth during challenging moments? How can Jewish ritual and teaching guide and fortify us when life's passages feel daunting? And how can our community support and encourage us when the way forward remains unclear?

These questions will shape not only my teachings over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but our entire year's journey together. Our theme: Thresholds—how can our tradition and community help us to navigate transitions in our personal and communal lives with courage, wisdom, and faith?

Our destination may be unclear, but the promise remains: *asher ar'eka*—I will show you, says God, not before you start, but as the journey of your life is unfolding.

In this new year, may we have the courage to be Ivrim—boundary crossers who see both flame and light, who hold both hope and heartbreak, who choose again and again the complicated, beautiful path of blessing.

L'shanah tovah u'metukah—may this be a good and sweet year for all of us.