

Tonight we return to our sermon series on the Ten Trials of Abraham. We are up to number four, which our sages deduced from the verse *Now Abraham was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold.*<sup>1</sup> It doesn't sound like much of a trial, does it? As Tevye said in *Fiddler On The Roof*, if money is a great curse, may God smite me with it and may I never recover! But it was not Abraham's wealth that caught the attention of our ancient sages. It was yet another journey that is part of life, the journey from sustenance to prosperity, a journey that some of us will never complete. That is life. But we all must embark on the journey, and the fact is that some people never do. I recently read about a man running for Congress who supports incest, bestiality, and pedophilia. He wanted to run as a Libertarian but they expelled him from the party, so he is running as an independent. He has also never worked a day in his life, and lives in his parents' basement. Not becoming prosperous is no sin. Not even trying to be self-sufficient is, absent some exceptional circumstance.

This must be a well known theme amongst Christians and Jews alike, because there is a rare classic Jewish joke that is also told by Christians. It is about the young man who wants to

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 13:2

marry a young woman and is asked by her father, “If you have no job, how will you support my daughter?” The young man answered, “God will provide for us.” Upon hearing that the father had given his permission, the mother was furious. “How could you let him marry our daughter when he has no job?” The father replied, “What could I do? He called me God.”

Now let us return to Abraham. Our sages drew on more than the single verse I quoted in defining this as one of Abraham’s Ten Trials. They also took note that when their flocks grew too large for them to remain together, Abraham gave his nephew Lot his choice of where to go, saying that whichever direction Lot chose, Abraham would go the other way. Lot chose to go east, to the city of Sodom, as in Sodom and Gomorrah.

There is great symbolism in that choice. Our sages taught that there are four attitudes towards money:

What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine, which is the attitude of an ignoramus, according to the Talmud. Some believe that the best thing for society to do is to eliminate private property completely. If that were the case, why get out of bed and go to work in the morning?

What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is mine is the attitude of

an evil person who is never satisfied with what he has and so he seeks to take what does not belong to him.

What's yours is yours and what's mine is mine is the attitude of most people, says the Talmud, but it is also the attitude of the sinful city of Sodom, where Lot went. What then is the attitude of the righteous person? What's yours is yours, and what's mine is yours. Wealth is to be shared, not hoarded.

The Torah puts limits on the obligation to provide for others, most famously by designating Shabbat as a holy day on which no work can be done. Spending time with one's family is another way of providing for them. If you are around my age, you will remember the Harry Chapin song "Cat's In The Cradle," which delivers the same message as the old story about a businessman who took off from work to go fishing with his son. He wrote in his diary, "Went fishing with my son. Wasted the entire day," while his son wrote, "Went fishing with my dad. Best day of my life."

Like Abraham, we must all meet the challenge of going out and becoming self-sustaining. If we are blessed as Abraham was, the challenge is to not fall into the "what's yours is yours

and what's mine is mine" trap, but to rise to the level of "what's yours is yours, and what's mine is yours."

I'll conclude with a story that reminds me of two members of our congregation, both who have met this challenge and are known to say frequently, "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this mitzvah." The story is about a young groom who is given two hundred rubles as a wedding gift to buy a business and support himself and his family. He goes to the marketplace and finds a business he likes, and makes the offer to buy it. The owner accepts the offer of the two hundred rubles, but when the young groom reached into his pocket to pay, he found the bag of rubles was gone. He left the marketplace sobbing.

A wealthy man saw the sobbing groom and asked why he was crying. The young man told the story, and the other man said, "This is a miracle! I just found a bag with two hundred rubles in it. But just to make sure, tell me: what denomination were your rubles?" The young man said, "I had five forty-ruble notes," and the wealthy man exclaimed, "That's exactly right! I'll go and fetch your rubles immediately!"

When the wealthy man returned, another man came out from hiding and stopped him. He said, “I saw what you did, and I am ashamed of myself. I am the one who stole the young man’s rubles. Please, take them.” The wealthy man responded, “How dare you! You have already stolen once. Now you want to steal again by robbing me of the opportunity to do this mitzvah!”

What’s yours is yours and what’s mine is mine is not the worst attitude in the world, but in this fourth trial, Abraham teaches us that those who are both blessed and righteous can do better. What’s yours is yours, and what’s mine is yours may be a rare attitude, but then again, how many people truly deserve to be called a *tzaddik*? Tonight we learned that one such person was Abraham and that we can all aspire to that way of thinking.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this subject, see *The Ten Journeys of Life* by Rabbi Michael Gold, on which this sermon is based.