

My oldest son, Ben, will be graduating from college this year. Much as I did thirty years ago, Ben is thinking of taking a year off and then heading on to graduate school. When I took my year off, I was debating whether to go to law school, study for a PHD, or go to rabbinical school. My parents didn't offer me much advice---though I know they were rooting for law school--because they knew that whatever I chose would offer me a solid career path.

I am more than happy to offer advice to Ben. But I'm really not sure what advice to give. These days, there may no longer be any such thing as a solid career path. Thirty years ago, I had a pretty good idea what my life as a lawyer, an academic or a rabbi would look like down the road. But does anyone really know what it will mean to be a lawyer in thirty years? Will we still have tenured professors who devote much of their time to research and writing? And, with apologies to Cantor Wolk, whose son Michael is graduating from Rabbinical School this year-- does anybody know what the rabbinate will look like in 2041?

We live in a time when some of us are facing real adversity. Since last year, when I spoke to you about choosing hope over fear, not much has changed. The unemployment rate has gone down a little bit; though the number of people who are so discouraged they have stopped looking for a job has probably gone up. Foreclosures are continuing at a steady rate. Health care costs have forced even more people into the ranks of the uninsured. Even here in Plainview, we are seeing the number of applications for special consideration rise dramatically this year, as the ongoing economic downturn takes its toll.

But, even for the majority of us who are doing okay, things have changed. These days, all of us live in a time of tremendous uncertainty. Clearly, we face continue to face serious economic uncertainty. Yes, we may be working, but how many of us these days feel that our jobs are truly secure? Yes, we may own our homes, but will they even maintain their value, much less appreciate? Yes, we are saving for retirement, but what kind of return can we expect on our investments, and will we ever accumulate enough to able to retire with confidence? Many of us, I am sure, feel that we used to know the answers to these questions. Nowadays, we often feel as if we are just taking a shot in the dark.

In many other areas of our lives, things are also becoming more and more uncertain. For example, the way that we do the most basic tasks in our lives is constantly changing. We face tremendous technological uncertainty every day. Not too long ago, there were only three basic ways to communicate; make a phone call, send a letter, or have a face to face conversation. Now, we have dozens of options. We can call from a landline, call from our cellphones, call from our computers. We can Skype, instant message, Facebook message, or email. We can have video conferences, or conference calls, text message or find each other through foursquare. I think it's still possible to send a letter as well. What's the best way to communicate? That's a question I ask every time I want to reach out to another person. And for every person, the answer is different. And we face the same kinds of questions when we deal with everything

from shopping, to bill-paying, to reading a book. All of sudden, there are an almost bewildering number of choices we have to make just to get through the day.

Meanwhile, uncertainty dominates the headlines. Was this year's severe weather, the hurricanes, the downpours, the snowstorms just an anomaly, or is it a harbinger of global warming? Will our government eventually drown in a sea of debt? Will there still be Social Security and Medicare when we retire? Will the Arab spring and other changes in the Middle East create new, democratic societies, or fundamentalist states that will threaten Israel?

I could go on and name even more sources of uncertainty in our lives. But enough already. Because the more we focus on how uncertain things are these days, the more daunting our every day lives begin to seem. And the easier it is to fall into the trap of thinking that everything in our lives has slipped out of our control.

How do we live our lives in this time of uncertainty? To begin with, we must remember that we do, in fact, have control over how we respond. In our Torah portion this morning, Abraham and Sarah find themselves in a series of uncertain situations. And in each case, they address the uncertainty by changing their own attitudes or behaviors. For example, when Isaac is born, Abraham seems to expect that Isaac will grow up alongside his older brother Ishmael; that the two boys together will be the heirs to the covenant with God. Why else would Abraham have circumcised Ishmael? Why else would Abraham and Sarah raise the two boys together? But things don't work out according to Abraham's plan. It soon becomes clear to everyone but Abraham that the two boys cannot share a home together, much less the covenant with God. Sarah correctly demands that Ishmael must go. But Abraham is reluctant to give up his plans. In fact, the Midrash suggests that sending Ishmael away is the ninth and hardest of Abraham's trials. What would happen to Abraham's beloved older son if he sent him away? Would he grow up to be a man of God, or become a lawless nomad? And what would happen to Abraham's household?

With strong encouragement from God, Abraham eventually does what we all have to do in the face of great change: he changes himself. Instead of being held back by his long cherished expectations for the future, Abraham breaks free. He lets go of the past and learns to think differently. Abraham recognizes that he cannot guarantee Ishmael's future by keeping him close. This tactic may work for Isaac, but Ishmael is a different kind of person. With regard to Ishmael, uncertainty will always be Abraham's reality. So Abraham must learn to think about what's best for the whole family; even if it doesn't fit in with his plans. With his decision to send Ishmael away, Abraham changes his outlook and becomes more realistic, more resilient and less controlling. In the face of uncertainty, Abraham responds with growth and change.

Like Abraham, we can control how we respond to change and uncertainty. And one way to respond is to change ourselves, to see uncertainty as a challenge to grow. Like Abraham, we are never too old to adopt a new way of looking at things, to learn new skills, to adjust our priorities. I have a good friend in California who prides herself on being an amazing stay at

home mom. For years, she was the class mom, the PTA volunteer of the year, the all purpose homework helper and after-school chauffer. My friend is the model of an involved, loving and effective parent. But over the last few years, her family's financial situation deteriorated. As her kids grew older, it became clear that the only solution was for her to back to work. But for a long time, my friend resisted. She saw herself as a mom first and foremost; she couldn't imagine compromising on that principle. Finally, necessity forced my friend to start thinking differently, to see that there were other ways to help her children that were even more important right now. About a year ago, my friend went back to work outside the home. The change was difficult for everyone, at first. The household was disrupted and her husband and kids had to take on more responsibilities. My friend missed being hands on with her kids all the time, missed her volunteering and her daily routine. But as things have settled down, my friend is starting to see the benefits of thinking differently; of finding another, very different way to be an amazing mom.

This story is played out in our own community every day. We reinvent ourselves out of necessity. We learn to take on new roles, tackle new challenges. And we grow as a result. It would be easier to stay the same, of course. But in the uncertain time we live in, the best response to change is often to change ourselves.

Economists tell us that all this uncertainty has a way of making us focus more on ourselves. At a time like this, we naturally want to make sure that our own houses are in order. We are conservative about spending and even more so about taking on debt. Our tradition, however, teaches us that this time of uncertainty should also be a time of connection, a time of reaching out to others to help address the problems we face together. In the last part of our Torah portion, Abimelech, king of Gerar, who has often clashed with Abraham, reaches out with an offer of peace. Abimelech may well be motivated by uncertainty. Abraham's power and influence continue to grow; God seems to be on Abraham's side. Abimelech realizes that, in a time of uncertainty, cooperation not conflict, offers the best outcomes. He is even willing to swallow his pride and pay compensation to Abraham for his bad behavior in the past. Abimelech doesn't stand on principle; he does what is best for his people, even at great cost to himself. And Abraham is wise enough, and big enough, to respond in kind.

For us, too, in this time of uncertainty, it is imperative to connect. Now is precisely the wrong time to retreat into our homes and close the shades. We have to fight the impulse to isolate, to live every family for itself. Instead, we should be doing what we can in our own community to bring people together and, even more important, to reach out to our neighbors who are in need.

As Abimelech and Abraham show us, our community is stronger when we reach out to help each other; when we give what we can. The challenge of our time is to care, in spite of uncertainty. Here at Plainview Jewish Center, we are trying to model what it means to care. That's why we are launching today a major food drive for Hazilu. That's why we are doing more

than ever to help make sure that no family is cut off from our PJC community because of economic adversity. That's why we are doing what we can to help people in our community who are experiencing hardship; not only with some financial support, but also by helping to make connections to agencies, institutions and employers who can help.

Each of us, as individuals, should be asking the same question. "What can I do to reach out to another person? What can I do to show that I care?" The answer may be as simple as filling up that brown paper bag for Hazilu and bringing it back next week. It may be as involved as using our connections to help a friend or neighbor find a job. It may be as generous as finding a little extra money to support an organization like Hazilu or the Interfaith Nutrition Network that is on the front lines of helping people in need. The more each of us can do to reach out, to connect, and to help bring people together, the closer we come to solving the problem of uncertainty from the ground up.

Ironically, living in a time where the future is so uncertain makes it harder to focus on the present. Yet, if we spend all our time worrying about what the future will bring, and how we can prepare ourselves for it, we run the risk of losing our ability to appreciate the blessings of every day. Turning back to Abraham and Sarah, we see a wonderful example of not letting the uncertainty of tomorrow overwhelm the blessings of today. When Sarah gives birth to Isaac, she is ninety years old; Abraham is one hundred. Talk about uncertainty! If I worry that I will be sixty four when Yoni graduates High School, I can only imagine how much Abraham and Sarah worried about being able to be active, energetic and involved parents for Isaac. You don't see too many one hundred and eighteen year olds at commencement ceremonies. But when it comes to celebrating Isaac's birth, and later his weaning, Abraham and Sarah refuse to let uncertainty get in the way. If anything, they rejoice even more in their miracle baby. If people around them are laughing at Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Sarah are laughing right back. They allow themselves to savor the joy of the present, unmarred by concern for the future.

Once we have done what we can to set our families on a firm foundation, once we have set our houses in order and prepared ourselves as well as we can, we too need to turn back to the present. Getting through this time of uncertainty will be a lot easier and a lot more fulfilling if we can focus on all the good we have in the here and now. In fact, not knowing what will be tomorrow should help us appreciate even more what we have today. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer teaches "Repent one day before you die"? His students ask him, "What kind of advice is this? How can anyone know when they will die?" "Exactly," Rabbi Eliezer answered, "that's why you need to repent today". For Rabbi Eliezer, the uncertainty of tomorrow is a challenge to us to make the most of today; to live with a sense of urgency each and every day.

How can we make the most of today? First of all, by celebrating the good things in our lives that uncertainty, and even adversity, cannot take away. For example, many of us have loving spouses, devoted children and grandchildren, nurturing parents, caring brothers and sisters. These relationships sometimes bring us aggravation. But for the most part, our families

give us love, support and a sense of belonging that make our lives richer every day. In a time of uncertainty, our family may be the closest we have to a sure thing. There is no better time to make family a priority in our lives, and to truly appreciate the blessings of family, than today. We can say the same thing for good friends; the ones who are with us in good times and in bad. Friendships enrich our lives far more than the material things we often use as a measure of prosperity. Even the nicest car will eventually break down; the most luxurious vacation will become a memory, the best appointed home a burden. But good friends can fill an entire lifetime with blessings.

When we truly comprehend the uncertainty of our lives, our perspective changes. Things we take for granted become blessings; small moments take on great meaning. If we don't know what tomorrow will bring, how much more should we savor a good cup of coffee in the morning, that goodbye kiss from our spouse, the call or text or email from our kids? How much more delicious is our lunch, how much more satisfying our daily accomplishments, how much more joyous the moment we walk through the door at night? Chasidic tradition teaches us that even in most oppressive of curses, we can find hidden blessing. If uncertainty is the curse we all live with, then our challenge is to look for the blessings within this curse, and embrace them all the more.

How long will this time of uncertainty last? Obviously, we can't possibly know. I am hoping that next year, I will talk with you about how much better things are getting, how we have really pulled together to make a difference. Whatever happens, though, won't change a basic fact, one we are all too aware of right now. As Rabbi Eliezer teaches us, if we are truly wise, we recognize that life is always uncertain. Security and predictability are illusions that allow us to sleep peacefully at night; but also can breed complacency and indifference. I hope and pray that we will soon see the end of the hardship that is all around us. I believe we can do a lot to make a difference. But I also hope and pray that, no matter what happens, we retain our sense of urgency; that we always remember that each day provides us with an opportunity to grow and to learn, to care and to connect, and to enjoy the many blessings of life, love and laughter.