

Parshat Lech Lecha
 October 20, 2007
 IPOD vs Abe's Pad
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The question for this morning – is which of the following two images is most indicative and descriptive of your life: The Ipod or Abe's Pad? Now before you make your choice allow me to clarify these images so your choice will be a little easier. I suspect the Ipod will not require much elaboration, but Abe's Pad made need a bit of an explanation.

The Ipod is the symbol of our time. It is a portable media player designed and marketed by Apple – it enables you to take all your music with you all the time. It has sold over 110 million units since its introduction in 2001 and it is so ubiquitous that when my kids asked their bubbe what she wanted for her birthday – she replied an Ipod. The image of Ipod wearing kids and adults walking the streets of our cities has become almost iconic—they go about their business – ear phones plugged in – isolated in their own individual world of entertainment – blissfully disconnected from the world around them. This is the IPOD.

Abe's Pas will take a little more explanation – although it is an image familiar to anyone who has studied today's torah portion, *Parshat Lech Lecha* which introduces us to the founder of Judaism – *Avraham Avinu*.

A unique destiny was conferred upon Avraham as he was to become the founder of Judaism. Unlike the founders of other faiths, he left behind no written work, nor was he influential by position of power – he was only a wandering stranger in Canaan. So what made Avraham unique? What gave him the special qualities which were to transform the lives of generations of Jews and non-Jews down to modern times?

According to our rabbis, who studied the Torah carefully to make sure that it was mined for ever precious truth and no nuance went undetected, well according to the rabbis, Avraham had certain qualities of character, values by which he ordered his life – and these made him worth of being the first Jew.

Abraham became known as the foremost exponent of *hesed* – of lovingkindness. He exemplified the virtue of hospitality which is a manifestation of *gemilut hesed* – deeds of lovingkindness and he dramatized in and through his own personal life this value which was to occupy one of the highest places on the ladder of Israel's values. *Gedolah hachnasat orchim m'kabalat p'nei shechina* – “The act of hospitality, welcoming strangers, is greater say the rabbis, than even welcoming the presence of God. And the image that came to represent Abraham the man of *hesed* – the man of hospitality – was the image of Avraham sitting in his tent – which we are told was open on all four sides so that he could see strangers approaching – no matter the direction from whence they came. Abraham's tent – or Abe's Pad as Gila helped me capture it, Abe's Pad became the ultimate symbol of Judaism as much as the Ipod has become the ultimate symbol of contemporary America. And this morning I am asking you to consider which one do you want to be identified by – the IPOD, or Abe's Pad?

Anyone want to take a wild stab at which one I am going to argue for?

Well, before you make your choice allow me to make the case for Abe's Pad a little stronger. (I don't think the Ipod needs my help – it is doing quite well on its own).

In *Pirke Avot*, the rabbis say, “Let your house be wide open, let poor people feel at home there.” Many of us are familiar with the famous part of the Passover Seder when we open our door and proclaim: “Let all who are needy come and eat!” Well, according to the Talmud whenever Rav Huna used to sit down to a meal he would open his doors and proclaim this!

But, hospitality is more than a free meal. It manifests itself in a fundamental attitude of graciousness to others. It is revealing that Shammai, who earned the title of Judaism's angry man, was the author of the dictum: *hevey m'kabel et kola dam b'seyver panim yafot* -Greet every person with a pleasant and friendly manner.” In the pre-modern world, the principle of hospitality achieved sanctity. Today when we go from place to place and from country to country, we have various arrangement, - there are laws and procedures by which our status is protected – there are hotels and licensed taxi

drivers and all kinds of protections – but in pre-modern times it was only the sanctity of this value of *hesed* – hospitality – that guaranteed the safety of the wanderer.

But I believe there is an even larger and more significant application of this principal that needs to be discussed. *Hesed* – is more than an act it is an attitude.

And if acts of kindness are noticeably lacking in our contemporary world – the attitude of kindness is even more noticeably absent and with far greater consequences.

The problem of our time – even more than the closed home and the locked door, is the closed mind and the locked heart. The idea of a clever new media player that has taken the world by storm does not frighten me – but the attitude of isolation it seems to embody – the world of I, ME and MINE – is a world that closes in on itself – it is a very different world from Abe's Pad that was open on all four sides and I worry about the implications of the choices we make.

Abraham lived in a world of an open heart and an open mind – and as a result he became a model for countless generations. We live in a world of closed minds and closed hearts and well – just look at the models who occupy our contemporary stage.

In my mind what is the single greatest disappointment of President Bush? It is not that he has made mistakes – we all make mistakes and granted that a president's mistakes have more far reaching consequences than most of the ones you or I will make – nonetheless – our leaders are human and we cannot expect perfection from them. No, my gripe with this president is his total inability to confront his mistakes and learn from them – his almost complete inability to admit he has made mistakes. In the gap between his unchanging views and an ever changing world disaster is found.

Life moves forward. History moves ever onward. But the mind of too many contemporary leaders – in this our President is unfortunately not alone – but the mind remains frozen. The inhospitality to new ideas and new ways – is just as tragic in its consequences as the lack of hospitality to new guests. Never has the world changed as rapidly as it does in our time – this places upon each of us, and every one of our leaders the challenge to open his or her mind to new facts and to new alternatives and to new evidence, just as Abraham opened his tent to those who came seeking help and in need. To shut the windows of the mind is to court mental and spiritual suffocation. The most damning description of this president has been the repeated use – by friends and critics alike – of his incredible lack of curiosity. Why are we so inhospitable to thinking? Maybe it is that we are inundated with so much information in our age. Abraham lived in a gentler, quieter time – things moved at a slower pace. As you sat in your tent – you could see someone approaching from miles and miles away – you had plenty of time to prepare for them – plenty of time to anticipate their arrival – today, the world in which we live is such a noisy and hurried place. The action is feverish and the sound is deafening. A thousand activities and voices are competing for each and ever second of our time. We are so preoccupied with means, we lose sight of goals, we are so caught up with things, we have no time for thoughts. That is why this morning I make a plea for Abe's Pad over your IPOD.

When I was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I read an article by Rabbi Louis Finkelstein who as many of you know, served as the fourth Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary from 1940 to 1972 – the year I arrived at the Seminary. We are honored to have his son, Rabbi Ezra Finkelstein, *davening* with us this morning. Rabbi Ezra Finkelstein is known to many of us as he served for many years as the rabbi at nearby Midway Jewish Center. He is here today because he is a life long friend of the Schaja family and married Morty and Rebecca. Anyway, Rabbi Finkelstein's father, Chancellor Louis Finkelstein was for many years the dean of American Jewry, and I was the beneficiary of his *hesed*, his hospitality and was privileged to be invited to his Shabbat table many times during my years as a student at the Seminary and although he wrote many scholarly works it is an article he once wrote that I want to bring to your attention this morning. It carries the intriguing title: "Make An Appointment with Yourself." I speak this morning of Prof. Finkelstein – may his memory be a blessing –not only to honor his son who is *davening* with us – but to remind you that open minds and open hearts have been a Jewish preoccupation since *Avraham Aveinu* and did not end with *Avraham Aveinu*. In this article, which Prof Finkelstein wrote, he discloses that during his tenure as Chancellor there was a rule that anyone on the faculty who was involved in meditation or study was not to be disturbed by the telephone. The professor just needed to inform the switchboard operator – yes

when I first arrived at the Seminary we still had a switchboard operator – but all a professor had to do was inform the operator that he was studying, or thinking – and the operator would inform any and all callers that the professor was not available. The professor is thinking. In the article, Professor Finkelstein said he took a lot of grief for this policy – frequently callers were not happy with this response and then Prof Finkelstein adds, “It is odd how likely we are to respect the privacy of people talking but not of one who is thinking.” Prof Finkelstein goes on to say how important it is for him to study some Talmud every morning because it keeps him in touch with the great minds of all time. And he says that in this period regularly set aside for meditation, for reflection and study, he finds great strength as well as wisdom. Prof Finkelstein goes on to remind us of the celebrated incident in which Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity. It’s a famous story. Remember that Newton was sitting under a tree. An apple detached itself and hit him on the head. The important thing about the experience is not that he was lucky enough to be hit by the apple, but that he was fortunately alone and he could think and he was able to examine the implication of the falling fruit. Had he been wearing his IPOD he might have been so engrossed in his music that he would have ignored the whole incident.

I find the image of Prof Finkelstein just sitting and thinking an enormously comforting one. I find the image of President Bush – just sitting and thinking – well I find it hard to imagine and therein lies much of our contemporary dilemma.

The Jewish Theological Seminary – remains Abe’s Pad, *Avraham’s Tent* – a place where people can just sit and think and be open to new ideas and new ways to approach the world.

This synagogue is the logical extension of Abe’s Pad – *Avraham’s Tent* – it is a place where you can come on any Shabbat and just sit and think, where on any day of the week you can attend a *minyán* or a class and learn and grow. Check all IPOD’s at the door.

One of the perils of growing older is that we tend to think less and less. We feel we know all the answers. Why bother thinking through things again when we have already thought about them once before? Choose Abe’s Pad over your Ipod – refuse to allow yourself to be stifled by a closed mind.

And if we in our time are threatened by closed minds – an even greater danger lies in the closed heart. The inability to reach out beyond ourselves and to feel the pain of others, to exult in the happiness of others, to truly share life with others – this is the disease that threatens our world. The contemporary American President lives in a bubble, isolated from the world – he speaks only to his closest advisors and interacts with few beyond his closest associates. Abraham’s tent was open on all four sides – *gemilut hesed* means to reach out, to enlarge your spiritual home as well as your physical one. Our kitchens are ten times the size of our grandparents and many of us do one tenth of the entertaining – Abraham lived in a tent – but it was always open to others – we live in beautiful homes that few are ever invited to enter. We are a generation that has so much to give – and yet we get up, plug our Ipods into our ears and go upon our way gloriously unaffected by the world around us. In a hungry world – we have food. In a lonely world we have friendship – we have love, we have understanding, we have caring in abundance, we have encouragement, we have compliments galore that we have stored up for the using – but we keep it all for ourselves. How sad.

Avraham Avinu was the first Jew and he became the first Jew because of one worthy trait: he exemplified hospitality – he was a man of *hesed*. Because his tent was open on all sides – he met many people, he welcomed them, laughed with them, cried with them and learned from all of them – because his heart and mind was open to all – he grew in spirit, he grew in character, he grew in moral excellence to become the founder of a people that would change the destiny of the world.

So the choice is yours. Don’t worry – this is not a campaign to get you to give up your IPOD – God forbid – all I want you to do is unplug it now and then – open your ears to the people around you – open your hearts and your minds to the glory of this world that surrounds you each and every day. Our president may have to live in a bubble – but you don’t. We are B’nai Avraham – we are the children of Abraham, we are intended to live in a tent that is open on all four sides. Unplug your Ipod – welcome to Abe’s Pad.