

VAYERA
“Find Your Enthusiasm”
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One of the most popular shows on TV these days is Larry David’s comedy ironically titled: “Curb Your Enthusiasm.” I say ironically – because the protagonist Larry David is noticeably unenthusiastic about almost everything. For example in one plot played out over a number of shows last season, Larry’s good friend Richard Lewis needs a kidney transplant – and Larry offers his – but in typical “Curb Your Enthusiasm” manner – he does so not with any sense of conviction or enthusiasm – but out of sheer feelings of paranoid guilt. This year Larry takes in a black family, ironically named The Blacks, made homeless by Katrina – but here again – this incredible act of social consciousness and kindness is more his wife Cheryl’s idea than his and Larry finds himself caught up in the matter without much enthusiasm on his part.

Curb Your Enthusiasm is successful because it is funny – but it also taps into the zeitgeist of our times – and our times are notable for their lack of enthusiasm about things large and small. I recently saw the movie “Across the Universe” – a delightful trip back to the sixties made worthwhile by the two hours of Beatles music that occupy center stage for almost all of the movie – but I was struck by the scenes of the 60’s with the protests against the Vietnam War – it was a time of enormous passion and strong beliefs. Many a dinner table in the 60’s was upset by debates between the generations over the policies of LBJ. I couldn’t help but think how different are the times today – once again we are involved in a war that is no less problematic, no less debatable, no less tragic than the one that occupied our attention some 30 years ago – and yet this war and the response it engenders from young and old is remarkable for its lack of enthusiasm. No protests in the street, no violence, no anger, no debates upsetting our dinner conversations in 2007 – just a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

Oh it is not fair to say we are completely and totally unenthusiastic – but if I were to say: “Quick, list three things that you got enthusiastic about, passionate about in the last few weeks... Odds are, your list would not include the War in Iraq – more likely your list would include sports things – as in, “we have great tickets for the Jets game this Sunday against Buffalo, we’re going to paint our faces and get there early and...” - well you know how it goes.

And if I am lamenting our lack of enthusiasm for things political in 2007 – well things Jewish – faggetaboutit! Jews by and large have not lost their religion. We have just lost our enthusiasm for our religion. The spirit of our times was captured very well by the little boy who reported his experiences in religious school to his parents. He said: "Look, I don't mind going to Sunday school, but don't expect me to get involved in Judaism!"

People come to shul – pretty much like they used to, give their kids a Jewish education – pretty much like we used to – we just do it with less enthusiasm than ever before. When was the last time you got enthusiastic about Judaism?

“I know minyan starts at 6:45 in the morning – but I was so excited I couldn’t sleep and I was waiting at the door when Rabbi Solomon arrived to unlock it!” Or maybe on your list was something like: “I know Hebrew School comes at the end of a long day of school, but I was so excited to get there – I literally ran all the way!” Those weren’t on your list? Why am I not surprised?

“Curb Your Enthusiasm” may be the right title for a contemporary TV show – but “Find Your Enthusiasm” is the challenge that I place before you this morning – it is my fervent hope that we can redirect our energy in some more constructive ways, find some passion for things that matter – but don’t worry – there will still be time for the Jet’s game on Sunday.

It is good that we come to shul during the course of these weeks to read the chapters of Genesis dealing with the story of Abraham. Curb Your Enthusiasm follows the everyday activities of one unremarkable couple – Larry and his wife Cheryl. We tune in each week to watch them interact with their community, with their friends. We are amused as they get themselves in and then out of one mess after another. *Parshat Vayera* – is the second in a series of Torah portions that follows the every day activities of one unremarkable couple – Abraham and his wife

Sarah. We tune in each week to watch them interact with their community, with their friends. We are amused as they get themselves in and out of one mess after another – they want children, they can't have children, Abe has a son via his concubine, than Sarah forces him to get rid of the kid, then she gets pregnant in her old age, than he finally has a son, then God wants him to sacrifice his son. And while all this is going on – strangers visit – Abe takes in the guests and provides for them, he interacts with his nephew Lot, he has a run in with a king down south who thinks his wife is hot. It is just one thing after another.

You know if you think about it, on the one hand it is remarkable that Larry David has been able to parley another show about nothing into a hugely popular cultural phenomenon. But it is equally remarkable that our Bible – the most significant Book in human history devotes so many chapters to *Avraham* and *Sarah*, to the day to day experiences of a single family, their challenges and responsibilities, their hopes and frustrations, the inevitable disagreements about raising their children, and various other domestic problems.

Larry David is a schlemiel. And God forbid, I would characterize *Avraham Avinu* in less than glowing terms – but at the very least – he is a bit of a *miskeyn* – he is tested time and time again as one after another unfortunate things happen to him and his family. And if not nearly as pathetic as Larry David, the founder of Judaism to which the Torah devotes so much attention is not a hero by any meaningful sense of the term. He is not some super-human near god-like figure. Abraham is not a prophet, nor is he a king, nor is he a lawgiver, nor is he a miracle worker. Nor does Sarah his wife demonstrate exceptional powers or supernatural gifts. So what is so special about these two people that their lives were preserved for eternity in the Bible and for which they merited the designation: "the first Jewish family?" What was so great about *Avraham Avinu*?

Well I would like to suggest to you that if Larry David has captured the zeitgeist of our times through his lack of enthusiasm – Abraham became the model for all time by his embrace of enthusiasm.

Now, I know, this is a bit simplistic. Abraham's spiritual greatness was obviously the composite of many qualities, but despite this risk of over-simplification, and because we don't have time for a book length development of this topic, I would like to suggest to you that Avraham and Sarah's greatness lie first and foremost in their attribute of enthusiasm for, their passion for - virtue. Larry David is funny because he frequently ends up doing the right things for all the wrong reasons. Abraham and Sarah end up doing the right things for the right reasons – and if it does not quite make for a knee slapping comedy series – it does make for compelling literature that has inspired generations of Jews and non-Jews for thousands of years.

Virtue, now there is an item that was probably not on most of your "things I get enthusiastic about..." lists. These days we get enthusiastic about many things - but it is not easy to get ourselves worked up, excited over and enthusiastic about – virtue – but Avraham did. And a thousand years from now I doubt people will be talking about Cheryl and Larry – but I believe they will still be talking about Abraham and Sarah – and it is because Abraham could not and would not curb his enthusiasm.

It would not be correct to say that Abraham had an interest in justice; he had a passion for justice. He demanded it with forcefulness, vehemence and daring. Abraham was not a philosopher who contemplated the nature of good and evil with detached speculation. He was a model of righteousness. He loved righteousness with an intense and passionate enthusiasm. He had an obsession for righteousness. Hospitality was a common practice of the ancient near east, but the Torah tells us that Avraham was unique in the enthusiasm with which he carried out the task. When the "strange visitors" arrived at his tent unexpectedly, Avraham *ran* to receive them and to set before them some food. "And he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat." As I mentioned last Shabbat, Jewish tradition teaches us that Avraham's tent was constructed with four separate entrances - one on each side, so that weary wanderers of the desert would have easy access to it, regardless of the direction of their approach. Now I have met many people today who are enthusiastic about how they constructed their homes. But usually it is the entertainment center, the bedroom or bathroom - that is the source of their passion. Rarely (although I do remember one very noteworthy exception) has anyone ever enthusiastically demonstrated the special features of their home that makes hospitality more attractive.

Avraham's passion for justice contains such great fervor and zeal that he even dared to question the inscrutable ways of the Almighty. In his famous question: *HaShofet Kol Haaretz, Lo Yaaseh Mishpat?* "Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

And even on that agonizing mission from which any parent would cringe in heart-tormented fear, Avraham

walked with dignity. *Vayakam Baboker* - "And he rose early in the morning" the Torah says. To which the rabbis pointed out - this means that he sought to fulfill the mysterious will of God, and that he believed that the Divine command must not only be obeyed, but obeyed with eagerness, with a willing heart. It is a very troubling section but troubling or not, there is no questioning the power of Abraham's enthusiasm. The sheer forcefulness of Abraham and Sarah's spirit attracted the loyalty and respect of their contemporaries. Larry David's ability to curb his enthusiasm amuses us. Abraham's inability to curb his enthusiasm transforms us. The Torah tells us that Abraham and Sarah's passion attracted converts to their way of life, not because of their convincing arguments, but because of their persuasive acts. Former pagans embraced this new and strange doctrine which taught the worship of one God and the fulfillment of His moral law, because of *Avraham's* contagious enthusiasm.

Emerson once wrote: "Every great and commanding movement in the annals of the world is the triumph of enthusiasm. Nothing great was ever accomplished without it!" Take that Larry David.

And so our challenge is to be what we have always been: a passionate people. Do you remember the first lesson you were taught in Hebrew School? The first religious lesson impressed upon the minds of every Jewish child is: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might". "Justice, justice shall thou pursue" – we teach our children that justice is not only to be practiced, but it must be pursued fervently. In the performance of *mitzvot*, the rabbis repeatedly stressed the importance of the "extra touch" or *hidur mitzvah*. The Sabbath clothes must be the finest one can obtain. The Sabbath meal must consist of only the most sumptuous dishes. Religious acts are not considered fully effective unless they are accompanied by *kavanah* or intensity. Jewish tradition counsels its adherents to "run to fulfill mitzvot". The rabbis have even prescribed the proper manner to assume upon entering and leaving the House of Worship. "While going towards the House of God, it is proper to walk briskly. Upon leaving, however, one should avoid rapid pace and walk leisurely." (I can't help but notice that the present practice is the reverse of this ancient rabbinic advice).

We are challenged to be a passionate people but we live in an unenthusiastic time. We are part of the Larry David generation that belongs to everything and is involved in nothing. Curb your enthusiasm? Not to worry, ours is well curbed. We join organizations, we attend meetings, and we go to dinners, not because of our strong desire to experience the enrichment of service or to eagerly affirm Jewish values. We often do these things like Larry David does them because of tangential and peripheral motivations. Jewish lives are not generally marked by a high level of spiritual fervor, by an intensified awareness of life's holiness and joy. It is not that Jews are no longer involved in Judaism - it is because we do not care enough, we are no longer passionate about our commitments. The world is filled with decency and goodness, but the forces of evil with greater zeal and determination, have captured the initiative.

We live in a world where it is easy to harness passion for a Jihad and to offer one's children for the sake of Allah, but the cause of peace is demoralized and dejected and can't muster much enthusiasm. A philosopher once said: "No virtue is safe that is not enthusiastic."

This morning let us hope and pray that we all become worthy descendants of *Avraham*. In reading about *Avraham's* life, we are summoned to discover a crown of enthusiasm and place it upon the throne of virtue where it rightfully belongs. My plea to you this morning – is please, please DON'T Curb Your Enthusiasm.