

*Chayah Sarah 2016*

*Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick November 26, 2016*

Here are some lines from one of my favorite comedians, the dead-pan Stephen Wright: "I intend to live forever. So far so good." Or "I went to a restaurant that serves "breakfast at any time". So I ordered French Toast during the Renaissance." And, "Everywhere is walking distance if you have the time." In our Torah portion this morning, the narrator says that "the Lord blessed Avraham **Ba-Kol**", with "everything." To which Stephen Wright might have said, "You can't have everything...Where would you put it?"

But really, what does it mean, that Avraham was blessed with **Everything**? Coming as it does after Avraham has just buried his beloved wife, Sarah, this statement is hard to understand. Now of course one way to read it is that Avraham was satisfied with and grateful for everything he had at every point in his life. Happy or sad, he was always grateful. And that, of course, would make a wonderful Thanksgiving sermon. But I think there is more to it than that...A great German Rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, who died in 1888 at what was the dawn of Modern Judaism, had a fascinating interpretation. He said that Avraham was blessed "Ba-Kol" with the ability to bring blessing to everyone. His conversion to Judaism in last week's portion did not isolate him from the gentile world around him. In fact he sat at the entrance of his tent to meet everyone who came by. Avraham, says Rabbi Hirsch, had the unique ability to form bridges between Judaism and the pagan cultures that surrounded him at the time. And as his proof text, Rabbi Hirsch brings the Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who said that that the "Ba-Kol" that Avraham was blessed with was actually a gem that suffering people could look at and be cured. Avraham, said Rabbi Hirsch, could diffuse the light of Gd into many colors and know how to address every individual - "Ba-Kol" - with all the good that was within him.

I like that reading very much. It helps me a lot to make sense of this week's portion in general. The whole reading focuses on only two vignettes - Avraham buying a grave for Sarah from the Hittites, and Avraham's servant finding a wife for his son, Isaac from among the non-Jewish community into which he was born. Why does the Torah go into such detail about these incidents between the first Jew and the non-Jewish world around him? Why isn't the Torah more like the Iliad and the Odyssey, focusing on great military victories and acts of heroism? I think Rabbi Hirsch is on to something here. The Torah focuses on the first Jew and all his interactions with the non-Jewish world around him to show that Jews can be an influence for good in the world ONLY when we are engaged in the world around us. We can only share goodness in the world when we are active in the world.

I read an interesting study recently about obesity. One of the most interesting and relevant findings was that if you have obese friends you are 54% more likely to be obese yourself. And there are lots of reasons for this correlation, some easier to characterize than others, but the bottom line of most of the research is that it has a lot to do with Social Networks. These days "social networks" makes us think of computers and Facebook. But social networks existed long before the computer age. Your social network is the people with whom you associate; the people you talk to, listen to, and correspond with. And there is a correlation between what you think and what your social network thinks. Sociologists who study this have shown that one's social network influences self-image and diet, and also things like smoking, drinking, voting behavior, divorce, altruism and a host of other behaviors. That's why synagogue is such a powerful source of good in the world. When a social network is formed around valuing mitzvot, those who are part of it are influenced by the teachings espoused here. We come together as like-minded people who want to share gratitude and kindness and patience and understanding. You are influenced by the people around you. We all know it's true but we don't often stop to think about it. Gd wanted Avraham to be a source of great good in the world and so he gave him the ability to relate "Ba-Kol" - to everyone. Social networks are required for the spread of good and valuable things.

But there was another aspect of this study that I found most interesting, and that is that social networks are formed and strengthened by facial expressions, not just words. I think that's why everyone relates to Emojis. We want to put a face on the words because so much of what we say is unspoken. It's called the "emotional contagion," and it is one of the most important ways we communicate with one another. This week's Torah portion begs us to look at the faces of the people speaking. And so, as we gather together in the most basic of social networks, our families and friends, we should be conscious not only of the way that social networks operate, but the way in which we ourselves influence them. The more conscious we are of our ability to shape the world around us, the more we can be an influence for building bridges ourselves and making the world a more civil and friendly, warm and inviting place for us all to live.

