

In his book, Between Man and Man, Martin Buber relates a unique experience. Buber was deeply immersed in his scholarly work which took most of his attention and energy. But for young students seeking wisdom and advice, he did allow time. On one particular day a young man came to Buber deeply troubled. It was a day on which Buber was very involved in a project. He neglected to sense the urgency in the young visitor's eyes or the cry for help and for advice in his voice. Buber's mind was set on quickly dismissing him and continuing with his project.

Later that day, another visitor came to Buber only to inform him that the first man had gone home and committed suicide. He had come to Buber seeking help and Buber failed to notice the signs, failed to ask the right questions. The incident had a profound impact on the great philosopher. It made Buber realize, unfortunately after it was too late, how his passion for his work often blinded him to the needs, the cries of those around him.

Buber's experience is much the same as that of our great leader Abraham about whom we read in tonight's Torah portion. We read that Abraham left his family and his home to pursue a dream. The Midrash tells of the dramatic breaking of his father's idol as a display of faith in just one God. Abraham's passion for his belief is admirable for he was willing to cut ties with his homeland and sever relationships with family and friends and abandon his native Haran. This strong drive molded our Patriarch into the great leader he became. God chose Abraham because God truly believed Abraham possessed rare qualities. He had what it takes – motivation, drive, passion, and commitment.

In this week's portion, however, we see another side of Abraham, a side which for too many of us is less appealing and less attractive. We are disappointed in our great Patriarch for in this instance we see that Abraham's drive and commitment lead him down the wrong path.

We recognize the familiar story of how God tests Abraham. God asked Abraham to demonstrate his faith by sacrificing his beloved son Isaac. Because Abraham deeply believed in God, he was ready and willing to heed the commands. The philosopher,

Kierkegaard called this devotion, in spite of the personal sacrifice, a "leap of faith". God told Abraham to jump and Abraham merely asked God "how high?"

Our Patriarch's obsession with fulfilling God's wishes and becoming the father of our people blinded his better judgment. He was so set on following God's commands to sacrifice his son that he failed to consider how Isaac himself might feel, whether he, too, was willing to go along with the test. He completely disregarded the traumatic effect it might have on the boy's mother Sarah. Abraham responded to God's charge with a simple "hinnene," "I am ready!" Even atop Mount Moreh, as he was lifting his arm to slay his son, Abraham failed to hear God calling him to stop. Twice God had to summon him, "Abraham, Abraham," before he became aware of the full implication of what he was doing.

We become frustrated with Abraham for we realize that he was so obsessed with following God's command, so driven by the hope to prove himself worthy, that he failed to consider the feelings of those so close to his heart. Like Buber, the same passion and drive which enabled Abraham to be a leader, also had the power to cloud his judgment, make him disregard how his actions would affect those around him.

Each of us is driven through life by goals and dreams, hopes and aspirations. We are guided by desires to achieve a certain amount of success in what ever we choose to commit our energies. Perhaps it is in our professions or careers, perhaps in championing a cause or belief. Whatever the particular goal we might set, it is our own inner drive which becomes the prime force enabling us to succeed.

But, so very often, energy and passion can easily turn into obsession. Taken to an extreme, we become so deeply intent on what we hope to achieve that we are blinded to the feelings and consideration of those around us whom we may hurt or neglect along the way. It is a human tendency to which we are all susceptible.

We all know people who put their businesses before their families. We know lay leaders who spend countless evenings away from home at meetings devoted to various organizations. As we go through our lives driven by our personal inner need to succeed, how often we neglect those so very close to our hearts! A friend, a relative, or even our most intimate companion are often neglected as we become totally wrapped up in our work, our careers, our children or our projects. A story is told of a psychiatrist's son who was

asked what he would most like to be. The boy simply replied that he would really like to be one of his father's patients!

Indeed, as we have learned from our great Patriarch, Abraham, and as we know from our own life, obsessions are often dangerous when out of control. But equally as harmful is the tendency to be so complacent without any drive or passion about life, that we allow our values to be shaped by the trends of our culture, by peer pressure, our every action and decision dictated by outside influences.

When we are growing up and go through adolescence, peer pressure is the single most powerful force in the development of our personality. We want to fit in and be accepted. We want our friends to like us and agree with our beliefs and ideas.

It is easier and much safer to go along with others than to stand up for what we might truly believe.

The greatest challenge in life is in balancing these two drives, these two tendencies. It is vital to have beliefs and convictions which we strive passionately to attain. It is important to reach our goals. We realize that commitment and passion made Abraham such a unique and great leader. We realize that the same energy will perhaps enable each of us to become the leaders we hope to be. But to go to either extreme, to be driven by our dreams so that we become obsessed, or to be so passive that we are fearful to formulate and express our own ideas, is a tension which we all must eventually resolve.

Abraham was clearly faced with the challenge of doubt in his public and private life. He was chosen leader of the great people, he pleaded with God for Sodom and Gomorrah and led his followers in battle. Repeatedly he was summoned to display his devotion through various deeds. Yet, he was also a father and a husband, an ordinary man who had to struggle with the desire to seek his destiny as a leader of his people, to fulfill his inner drive, but not to neglect his responsibility to his family and friends.

For Abraham, God's test was the climax of his life. His passion for God drove him too far. After the incident on Mount Moreh was over, he left, realizing what he had done, how he had alienated his wife and son, how his faith had become an obsession.

We also recognize that this entire experience is part of the growth of Abraham. We can identify with his struggle for we see a picture of a man grappling with himself and with

his spirituality. We can identify with his struggle because we all go through the same process. In his super-human commitment, Abraham displays a very human problem.

Abraham is a model for each of us. Like Abraham, we need to achieve a careful balance in our lives. On the one hand, we must be true to ourselves, to that inner voice which pushes us and gives us the energy to succeed. On the other hand, we must be mindful of the risks involved to ourselves and to our families. If even our great Patriarch, Abraham had difficulty meeting this task, how much more important it is for us to recognize the challenge and achieve such a balance.

The sage Hillel is noted for saying in Pirke Avot, the ethics of our father, "If I am not for myself – who will be for me? And if I am only for myself – what am I?" Each of us experiences this tension in balancing our public and our private lives, our inner drive and our responsibility to others. It is a fine balance we must strike. May we be inspired by our great Patriarch, and may we, in our own lives, achieve such harmony. Amen.