

“Yes, No, anything but Maybe”

Parshat Toldot

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We stand at an interesting moment in the torah. And I would like you to imagine how it might have turned out very differently. Last week we read: *Avraham zakeyn, ba byamim* - that Abraham is old and advanced in years – and he had some unfinished business – specifically his heir and favorite son Isaac was still unmarried. God had promised he would be the father to a great nation – and here – his son, the key to those future generations remains a bachelor – something must be done. At the end of this week’s torah reading, Isaac finds himself in the very same situation. He is old and he too has some unfinished business – namely marrying off his son Jacob. He remembers that what his father did, sending Eliezer back to the old country to find a match for him worked out pretty well. So he recommends’ the same strategy for his son Jacob.

Remember when father Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac? *Eliezer* went, and he chose a fine woman, a woman named Rebecca. How did he choose her? He sat by the well and he watched as the young women approached to water their camels. And he chose Rebecca. Why? Well, *Eliezer* decided that she was kind and hospitable, judging by the way she welcomed him when she met him at the well. He determined that she was energetic and generous, judging by the way she gave him water and then gave water to his camels.

Now here is the scene I want you to imagine and how it might have turned out very differently: Eliezer turns to Rebecca and reveals who he is and the purpose of his trip and the reason he had been standing by this well. He tells her that she is the one he has chosen to be the wife for his master’s son and he wants to her to come with him to travel back to Canaan, to leave her family and everything she knows in order to go with him and live with some as of yet – unknown man and imagine that moment – as Eliezer waits for her response – waits for her to take him back to meet her family – will you go with me? He asks? And imagine if she would have said: “maybe”.

The whole reason Eliezer is taken with her is because of her kindness, her compassion and her courage and decisiveness. He is impressed by the way she makes up her mind, the way she packs her belongings and is willing to go with him – imagine if she had not been so decisive – imagine of at this most critical moment in her life - -she would have said, “Can I get back to you on that? Can I have a few days to think about it?” Jewish history might never have been the same.

Imagine the moment when God said to Abraham – *Lech Lecha* – “Go, leave your land, the place of your ancestors, the only home you have known – and travel to an unknown place that I will show you.” Imagine if Abraham, instead of decisively packing up and heading out to follow the command of God – had instead replied: “maybe. Can I think about it?” “Abraham – take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and offer him as a sacrifice,” – and Abraham replied – “maybe, give me a couple of day sand I’ll get back to you on that one.” And the entire nation stood at the foot of Mt Sinai and the mountain was covered in smoke and thunder and lightning filled the earth and a voice rings forth challenging the entire people to accept the torah – one *midrash* has it that God literally lifted the mountain over the heads of the entire people and asked – “will you accept My torah?” – and we know their response at that most dramatic moment in

Jewish history was - *-naaseh v'nishma* – “yes, we will accept, we will do and we will obey!” Imagine – if instead – they, standing their – thunder and lightning and God’s booming voice – mountain hanging over their head – had replied – “maybe. Can we get back to you on that?”

I have looked and searched the entire Bible – and I am hard pressed to find a single “maybe” in the entire bible. A lot of yeses, even a considerable number of no’s – but not a single maybe. Joshua challenges in dramatic fashion the people to choose – to stand of *Har Ayval* if they stand with the Lord, to stand on *Har Gerizim* if they are against Him – but no one stood in between. Elijah challenges an indecisive nation to choose – “are you for God or are you for Baal – choose!” – no maybes allowed. “Maybe” was just not an option in biblical times. But if an article in this week’s Wall Street Journal is to be believed – “maybe” is the answer of choice in 2010.

The article begins by saying: It seems it wasn't long ago that invitations required definitive answers. We would receive a phone call or a piece of mail requesting our attendance at an event, and we were expected to call or write back—with an affirmative or negative response. But then electronic invites came along and made it way too easy for us to wriggle out of social engagements. All we had to do was click one little button: "Maybe." Once we saw how easy that was—no stressful decision or long explanation necessary—we started typing it into emails and texts.

Catch a movie tonight? Maybe.
 Brunch this weekend? Maybe.
 Join us for Thanksgiving? Maybe.
 See how easy it is? No commitment. No consequences.

Except that it does have consequences – and most of them are negative or at the very least annoying. The article goes on to say – that the problem with maybe – is that it means different things to different people. "I thought 'maybe' meant 'maybe,' " says Mamta Desai, a 26-year-old private-equity investment associate in Los Angeles. She learned otherwise when she and a friend threw a party last summer. They sent out a Facebook invite to 120 people. Fifty said they would attend and did. Twenty replied "maybe"—and just two of those people showed up.

'Maybe' is a weasel word," says Kerry Fitzpatrick, 70, a retired chief executive who lives in St. Petersburg, Fla. And the Talmud would seem to agree with Mr. Fitzpatrick when it cautions: “Let your yes be a yes and let your no be a no.” No room for weasels here.

But if maybe is an annoying answer when it comes to wanting to know if we can make dinner plans for Saturday night – it is downright unacceptable in many crucial moments. The article included a number of cute cartoons – each one showed when maybe would just be an unacceptable answer – the first one showed a baseball scene – a close play at home plate – everyone is looking at the umpire who replies: maybe. Another shows a woman sitting on an examination table in the doctor's office – “so doctor, am I pregnant? A third pictures a courtroom scene and the judge asking, “So, Mr. Foreman has the jury reached a decision?” Another pictures a husband and wife – the wife asking her hubby, “so, do you think these jeans make me look fat?” And the final one – is a picture with a man on his knees, staring lovingly into the eyes of a young woman as he asks – “will you marry me?”

We live in a world of maybe – and maybe that is why so many young people have so much angst about this most crucial of life's decisions. Rebecca had a critical decision to make when Eliezer popped the question – one that would change her entire life – she could go with him – to a strange new land to marry a promising but unknown and unseen man – or she could stay home and remain unmarried for now – but at least have the comforts of the familiar. Tough choice – no doubt about that – but I believe that it was made a bit easier because she only had two options – yes, or no. She chose yes.

Finding the right person to spend your life with is a challenging and daunting task and whether you ride to prom in a stretch limo or head out on donkey back for a date in *Ur Kasdim*; whether you hire a *shadchan* or you spend your time on the Internet – the challenges are really the same. Creating a loving, nurturing relationship is no more or less difficult today than it was 4000 years ago when *Avraham Avinu* tried his hand at finding a wife for his son. And the existence of loving couples today is a miracle no less taxing or stupendous than any reported in the Torah.

We learn from Isaac and Rebecca that finding love and maintaining love has always been one of life's greatest challenges. And when we are blessed with finding that love - it is our job to do everything within our power to make sure it works. Miracles are not easy to come by - not then and certainly not today. We look in all the wrong places for miracles. Rather than waiting for special effects from the sky, the strongest evidence of God's love for each of us is sitting in the chair next to us.

Too many young people come to my office wrestling with the difficulty of finding the right life partner and too many of them dwell far too long in valley of maybe. You would be amazed how quickly our conversation progresses when I take maybe off the table and force them to choose yes or no. I can understand the theoretical value of maybe – as it buys time to contemplate crucial questions that should not be hastily answered – **but what I have come to observe – is that for many people today maybe is not used as a temporary way to buy time – it has become a permanent way to avoid hard decisions.**

“How do you know when you have found the right person?” I would say that marriage is not only about finding the right person – but in making sure you are right for the person you find. Let me show you what I mean with examples from today's torah portion.

There are a number of love stories going on in today's torah portion. There is the story of God's love for Isaac, of Isaac and Rebecca's love for each other and their love for their children Jacob and Esau.

I don't know if you noticed – but Isaac is far from perfect. We don't have the time to discuss his flaws – but as patriarch's go – he is definitely wanting – the way he plays favorites with his sons, I could go on, but it is not nice to be critical of *Yitzhak Avinu* – and yet for all of his flaws, God loves him and we revere him.

Jacob and Esau – boy they were a handful – Jacob lies to his father, betrays his brother – Esau tries to kill his brother -- and yet their parents love them. Isaac and Rebecca – we know nothing

about their compatibility, they do not date; they have no chance to get to know each other before they get married and yet theirs is a love story for the ages -- in each of these examples from today's torah reading – love is freely given even though it is not deserved.

Real love is selfless, like the love of Rebecca for Isaac, like the love of Jonathan and David, like the love of God for His people. Real love grows out of a desire to give freely of ourselves in order to be nurtured by a relationship. Real love does not make demands on others, it makes demands on ourselves. Real love is not what you find in a relationship – it is what you bring to that relationship.

A young person comes to my office and asks: “How do you know when you have found the right person?” It's the wrong question. It is a question that focuses you on the other's attributes rather than your own.

None of us deserve the love we get. We do not earn it. It is not payment for services rendered. It is a gift freely given and should be gratefully received.

When we make our love predicated upon another person's behavior, we sometimes end up withholding our love from them.

Somewhere a woman has been disloyal to her spouse; a man has abused alcohol. Another person has made bad business decisions and has brought upon the family great financial crisis. There are those here who have not been the loving parents they should have been, or the dedicated children they should have been. And if we are the recipients of these deficiencies we are hurt and we are indignant. And if we allow our love to be conditional, we will allow hatred and anger to settle into our hearts and that hatred and anger will drive us apart, and will drive us both away from those whom we love and from God.

Isn't it interesting that God does not hate us for our sins. True our actions may at times distance us from God, and yet God, we believe, still loves us and waits patiently for our return. Are we not capable of the same for each other?

Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote: "I've never met a person whose greatest need was anything other than real, unconditional love. There is no mistaking love. You feel it in your heart. It is the common fiber of life, the flame that heats our soul, energizes our spirit and supplies passion to our lives. It is our connection to God and to each other."

None of us deserve the love we get. So when you get it – you have received a very special and wonderful gift. Embrace it.

Is this the one? Is this the right person for you? Yes or no? “Rabbi it is so much harder without maybe!”

Not really -- you know if you have found the right person to love, if **you** have become someone that can love this person unconditionally. The answer to your question will not be found in them but in *you* – not in *their* attributes or deficiencies – but in *your* ability to love them as they are – now and forever.

Elohai, Dodi V're'i - God who is our Beloved Friend, help us to learn from our matriarch Rebecca. Teach us to love unconditionally. Help us to see the good in the people in our lives, even when they frustrate us, to love them for their beauty which is sometimes hard to see, to help them be the best they can be. Help us too, to feel the power of Your love. We are undeserving – and yet, You love us. Help us to see ourselves as You see us. We are undeserving, unworthy – and yet we are loved. Help us to believe that we can yet become the people you need us to be, the husbands we need to be, the wives we need to be, the mothers and fathers, sons and daughters we need to be so that we will ever aspire to raise ourselves up and help spread your light in this world. May Your light illuminate our soul, and bring us peace, and let us say No, not maybe, let us say: Amen.