A couple of years ago, my family started a new tradition on Friday evening. Each of our kids would have the chance to light their own Shabbat candles. We’d stand around the dining room table and sing the blessing together, with three sets of flames glowing around the room, lighting up our kids’ faces. And it was a beautiful moment, made even more rewarding by the journey it took to get there. First, there was the task of agreeing on who would get each set of candle holders. Well, who had this one last week? And, aren’t they all nice? Then, there was the project of getting the candles to stay in the holder and not tip over. The trick was to burn the bottom of the candle and drip some wax into the cup – of course, with no help from us. Meanwhile, dinner was getting cold. There were always some other interruptions – trips the bathroom, a discussion of which matchbox is the best one. And finally, the moment of lighting the match, which might take just a few strokes, but could take ten or twenty, and trying to light both candles before the flame got to their fingers. And there was one more last-minute adventure: watching one of the kids blow out the match not like this, but like this, accidentally extinguishing the candles as well. And it would all start over again. The contours of this ritual varied week by week. But success didn’t depend on the kids. The beauty of the moment rested on my wife’s and my ability to refrain from commenting, criticizing, shouting, grabbing, sighing or rolling our eyes. The beginning of this traditional day of rest and family togetherness was an exercise in patience.

For all of us, the past 18 months has been full of waiting. There was waiting in line to get into Trader Joe’s at the beginning of the pandemic, waiting for PCR test results to come or colds to go away, waiting for the mail, Amazon two-day deliveries that didn’t happen in two days, garbage collections, concerts that were postponed for years, the Olympics, our porch heater replacement that was ordered in the winter and didn’t come until the heat of summer. Waiting for school to start up, only to have it close again. If you wanted a dog, or a bike, or a passport during the pandemic, you had to wait for it. I remember spending a hot afternoon standing in front of a bike store in Vienna waiting for the salespeople to come bring us bikes to look at outside. People had to put off surgeries they needed, not to mention vacations. And as much as we have to wait for our children and loved ones, they have had to wait for us. I remember the many things we’ve said to our children – maybe you’ve said some of these things too, to your children or your significant other: Not now. I’m busy. Give me minute. I already told you I’m doing something.

Patience is held up by our tradition as a highly valued quality, one of the most important *Middot,* or Jewish soul traits. This year in particular, as we begin the Days of Awe, it’s a good moment to reflect on how well we have practiced patience since last Rosh Hashanah, and how much we’ve learned. We have learned a lot!

The word for patience, in Hebrew, is *savlanut,* whose root, *Saval,* means tolerance, and sometimes it means suffering. *Saval* is also used in the bible to describe carrying something heavy. Patience is not just waiting for something to happen or stop happening. It’s tolerating the suffering we must endure during that time. It’s keeping ourselves in balance through a prolonged situation we cannot control. The danger is that our agitation, anxiety, and other emotions will get the better of us and make matters worse./ Each of us is more or less patient in different settings: some can carry the burden of a tough situation for a long time, unphased, in a state of equilibrium, and others find that much more difficult.

It isn’t always right to be endlessly patient. Like every Jewish *middah,* patience is a trait that must be balanced on a spectrum. Most of us have too little patience too much of the time. We live in a fast world with many moving parts. But it’s also possible to be too patient, in the face of bad treatment from others, things that will never get done until we press hard, or injustices committed against the powerless. This morning we read from the Torah a story in which many of us agree, Abraham exhibits far too much patience when God commands him to sacrifice his son. Traditionally we hold up Abraham’s loyalty and faith. In a more authentic reading for our time, we might say that Abraham failed God’s test, that God intended him to speak up and defend his child, to challenge any religious obligation that would ask such a sacrifice. But Abraham is patient to a fault, tolerating the suffering and uncertainty of this terrible ordeal all the way till the end. He answers his son’s questions calmy and gently. “God will see to the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.” He shows an impossible serenity. As it turns out, in this case, Abraham’s eerily extreme patience pays off, and he emerges, against all odds, WITH his son. If we can take ourselves out of the difficult theology of this story, perhaps we can appreciate Abraham’s act of carrying that burden.//

Actually, we find that throughout Genesis, this is Abraham. I see him as the ultimate *savlan,* aman of patience. In every situation, he seems to be able to tolerate pressure, suffering, even the fear and dread of the *Adekah,* long enough to make it through. Unlike Jacob, Esau, Isaac, Leah, Rebecca and Joseph, who lash out at each other over and over – unlike Moses, who shatters the tables in his rage – we never see Abraham act out of anger or frustration. His ultimate virtue may be his patience, and his reward for this is great. /

What enables Abraham to do this? More importantly, in those moments when our patience is lacking, how can we learn from him? Abraham exemplifies three important tools for patience through his experiences in the Book of Genesis. /

Soon after Abraham[[1]](#footnote-2) begins his journeys from Haran, he travels to Bethel with his nephew, Lot, their families and livestock. Pretty soon, strife arises between their herdsman, because, we read, “The land was not able to bear them… for their substance was great.” It might be like what some of us experienced during coronavirus – there’s not enough space, even if you’re house is very large. We’re using each other’s things, we’re too close together. In the beginning of the pandemic, maybe you saw, some parents posted pictures of themselves hiding in the bathroom or the closet, just to get a moment alone. Abraham can see this happening, so before the tension gets too high, he says to Lot, “Please, separate yourself from me. If you go left, I’ll go right, and if you go right, I’ll go left.” Has anyone felt like this in the past year? Anyone needed more time alone than was allotted to them?

We hear that Abraham is so much calmer than any of us have been during the last 18 months. From the outside, he seems removed from the tension his herdsman and family are feeling. But he must feel it, too. I believe Abraham just knows the unnecessary conflct that will come from giving in to these emotions at this particular time - the damage it will do to his family relationships. His ability to remain patient enables him and Lot to separate peacefully, without a destructive fight.

This text teaches us the value of monitoring our own emotional response, knowing the difference between when our emotions and our impulses are helpful and when they are not. There are productive emotions, like anger at an injustice that causes us to take action, or fear of injury that leads us to check that we’re safe. But sometimes those same emotions of anger or fear won’t help us at all. We all share the experience of waiting in the car for the traffic to move. And we know it never helps to scream at the stop light, pound on the steering wheel, or worry about being late. Our rabbis call this second category, *“tzaar larik,”* or wasted grief. / Wasted grief, emotions that will take an already difficult situation and just make it worse. And, in using this awareness, **timing** is essential. There is a moment in any situation when we might lose our patience. Once we’ve crossed the threshold, it’s hard to go back. The fire of our impatience has been lit. Judaism invites us to look out for our impatience, even to name it out loud, before it takes over. That’s when we have a window of opportunity, to call upon our powers of patience. This practice has been called, “Opening the space between the match and the fuse.”[[2]](#footnote-3) As I watch my kids struggle with their candles, and keep struggling, I have the choice to understand that if dinner gets cold, if 10 more minutes pass, it’s still more important that we have a moment of *sh’lom bayit,* peace in our home, to bring in Shabbat. And, that adding in my frustration will not really bring dinner any sooner. If I can open up that space between the match and the fuse and keep from throwing in that wasted grief, my patience will be rewarded. //

Later in his life, Abraham again must find his powers of patience in a negotiation with his neighbors, the Hittites. He is grieving the loss of Sarah, and he needs a burial site for her. He wants to pay full price to honor his late wife. But it isn’t happening like that. If you walked into this room, you might see Abraham, fists clenched at his side, biting his upper lip and pacing. He wants to shout, Just sell me a gravesite. Tell me how much it is, so I can get on with my list of things. But the Hittites have their own concerns. They want to be generous to their neighbor. They’re not sure what to do. They look at each other, trying to figure out if it’s ok to charge their new neighbor full price, or even any money at all, to bury his wife. / It’s not mentioned how long this conversation really lasts, but I imagine it is hours. Eventually one of the Hittites manages to drop a hint of what the full price would be, and Abraham finally buries his wife.

Abraham’s patience lies in allowing space for this process to unfold. The success of what one might think would be a minor transaction proves monumental in Torah, beginning our people’s relationship with the land of Israel. Sarah’s grave is the first piece of land bought by a Hebrew in Canaan.

How many times have you been in a rush – you’re running late, and somebody wants to make conversation, to do something considerate for you, or anything else that slows you down. The cashier is chatty ,or you run into a friend who wants to catch up and tell you how great their vacation was.

This story challenges us, even in our most frustrated moments, to see that other people’s behavior is not about us, even when it feels like it is. It helps to remember that our partner’s slowness in getting ready, our colleague’s failure to get the job done, or even our loved one’s remaining stuck in a struggle that is dragging us down as well, may be hard for us to deal with, but it isn’t out of not considering us; it’s about whatever is happening for them. In that moment when impatience begins to close in, can we avoid taking personally what is happening around us? Can we take up a little less space with our own agenda, and tolerate the time it takes for others to work things out for themselves? //

God has no patience for the people of Sodom. They are evil, and God plans to destroy them. Abraham steps up and pleads for the city. He asks, “What if there are fifty righteous within the city – will you really sweep away, and not forgive the place for the sake of those fifty righteous people within it?” God pauses and agrees, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Abraham continues, “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to *Adonai,* I who am but dust and ashes. But what if the fifty righteous should lack five?” And God responds, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five.” The negotiation continues until God has agreed to lower the number to ten righteous people to save the city. / In this story, Abraham shows us what might be the greatest key to patience: the willingness to search for the righteous and the good that exists in every person, for even a glimpse of the divine reflection that the Torah teaches lives in all of us, having been created in the image of God.

(😊) Seeing the good in every person can be endlessly helpful in finding patience when people frustrate us. It’s so much easier to tolerate all the articles of clothing our loved one leaves around the house, when we also know he’ll drop everything when you need him. It’s harder to see that the driver in front of us, whom we don’t know, might be a loving husband, when he’s travelling painfully slowly on a single lane road. Or, that our customer service agent could be the kind of person who can always cheer anyone up, and tell a great joke, when what she’s telling us now is that we need to wait on hold. In that space between the match and the fuse, another tool we have, to be at our best, is remembering that every person is more than just what we’re experiencing in that moment. They, just like the people of Sodom, deserve the benefit of the doubt and a chance to be fully appreciated, to be seen for the good that is in them. ///

It’s important to apply the same patience, and give that same benefit of the doubt, to ourselves, even when our own failures frustrate us. I think of this year’s accomplished Olympic gymnast, Simone Biles. After a lifetime of preparation, and with the expectation of winning gold medals and being the champion of her team, something changed for her that was out of her control. She found herself unable to do with her body things she knew, in normal times, she could do better than anyone else. It’s come to be called “the twistees.” You get lost in moves that your mind used to have no problem with, and if you try to ignore this and do it anyway, there’s a serious danger of injury. It must have been so painful to be in that position, powerless to fix the problem, with the world watching and your teammates hoping for you to come through, and not to be able to perform. To have to acknowledge your limits.

Watching Simone Biles speak about this on TV, I could see the peace she had come to about this experience, and I was impressed and inspired. Somehow, she rose above what could have been a failure and made it into a tremendous success. She found the wisdom to be patient with herself, to let go of something that it felt like she should have been able to do; to realize that success is not about winning the gold, or getting a promotion, or perfect grades, or doing all the things we set out to do. There are times when having patience means carrying a burden, and there are times when it means letting that burden go. It’s about taking care of ourselves and knowing what’s most important. Patience is pausing in those gaps between the match and the fuse, seeing what emotions will help and which ones will cause wasted grief. It’s about giving others love and understanding, looking for the best in each person, and doing the same for ourselves.

1. His name in this story is actually Abram, before it is later changed to Abraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)