Dvar Torah, Vayera, originally printed in the Leffell School newsletter, 2023

What should we be praying for these days? When it comes to the news, it can be hard to know. Our emotions may range from existential fear and blazing rage to deep grief and, if we're lucky, brief instances of relief or joy: pride for our soldiers and gratitude for the handful of released hostages. Should we pray for vengeance, or peace, or both? Should we offer memorial prayers for the over 1400 lost, or praise God for the safe return of our soldiers? The right words seem to elude us, and prayer can, at times, seem almost impossible.

The Torah suggests that Abraham may have felt similarly confused, especially as he walked his son to Mount Moriah for the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. We read of Abraham and Isaac walking silently, but we get no report of what they might have been feeling. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (quoted in Nehama Leibowitz) points out the ambiguity in the story's narrative style.

> The Torah deliberately leaves out details and concentrates only on what is essential to the purpose of the narrative, leaving the rest in obscurity. The characters' feelings are never completely expressed.

What was going through Abraham's mind? Was he terrified into silence, walking with his son in doomed submission? Or was he perhaps optimistic and filled with faith, knowing there would be a ram in the thicket to save the day? We have no idea.

The mishnah imagines that Abraham prayed on that day, and he was answered. On communal fast days, the mishnah teaches, we are to remind God of the prayer Abraham said (m. Ta'anit 2:4):

מי שענה את אברהם בהר המוריה הוא יענינו אתכם וישמע בקול צעקתנו היום הזה

May He that answered Abraham our father on Mount Moriah answer us and hearken to the voice of our crying this day.

This line, which we also say in our *Selichot* services, begs for explanation. *When*, exactly, did Abraham pray on Mount Moriah, and *what*, exactly, did he say in his prayer? The Torah doesn't tell us. We don't know what Abraham prayed, but whatever his prayer was, we know that it was answered. The tradition offers us a chance to believe that God heard Abraham's innermost prayers, without Abraham articulating any words aloud.

This is good news for those of us who don't know how or what to pray these days. The mishnah reminds us that we can put our trust in a God Who may answer prayers we haven't even spoken aloud. In these excruciating times, we can pray as the mishnah suggests: may the one who answered Abraham, in his innermost, unspoken prayer, also answer our prayers, however scrambled they might be. Amen.