

Rosh Hashanna 2014

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Shanna Tova.

Psalm # 90:

“You have gracefully taught us to count our days”

This is the 30th year that Regina and I have the privilege of standing in this tent both celebrating and engaging in the work of this holiday with a community that we love.

Every time that I am in this tent on this day, I appreciate the gift of the opportunity for focused introspection, for the inspired leadership of Rabbi Les, the beautiful music of Cantor Benji, the fellowship of our congregants and the rich tradition that guides us through.

To have the opportunity to spend (let me make a little confession) months thinking about the challenging and enigmatic story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, and to then to be able to share my thoughts with all of you, indeed makes this day count. I thank the ritual committee for inviting me to speak. I also thank all those in Bet Am who have stood up here and worked on interpreting this story. If you hear your ideas mentioned it might well be that they dropped into my mind and after years of forgetfulness and dormancy, reappeared in the form of what I perceive to be my own ideas.

I know with certainty that I have been in this tent for thirty years. What I do not know with certainty, is how many years I will be standing here in the future. This is not a morbid thought. In fact, our struggle with both our mortality and our limitations are the themes of this holiday cycle that starts with the joyous feel of Rosh Hashanna, the birthday of the world, and ends with the urgency of Ne'ilah, the closing service on Yom Kippur.

The goal of the holiday is to fearlessly face these challenges; to show up, to clean up and to wake up. We are directed to use our capacity as self reflective and self aware beings to put aside our habitual

mindset and enter sacred time and sacred space and to honestly look into our hearts and minds. We are prompted to ask ourselves the same question that God asked Adam, who hid in shame after the first recorded transgression in the bible, “Ayekah” Where are you?

To aid us in this task we have each other, our prayers, songs, rituals and sacred stories.

Today we look at the sacred story of the Akedah.

Abraham, our archetypal father, is a man of grand visions and decisive actions. In his homeland of Haran, he awoke to a compelling inner voice that told him “Lech Lecha” Go..leave all that is known and familiar to you. Go to a land that will be shown to you and establish a large and prosperous nation from your offspring and bring light and blessings to the world.

In this story, the voice of the vision, embodied in the anthropomorphic form that we call God, tells him once again, “Lech Lecha, (that is, leave all the reality that is known to you) and go to an unknown mountain, a metaphorically higher place, that I will show you and offer me your only son, (remember that his son Ishmael had been banished in yesterdays reading) the one that you love, (parenthetically, this is the first time that the word love is mentioned in the Torah), and sacrifice your son Isaac, as a burnt offering to me.”

What? We are stunned for a moment. How can this be?

The story represents a shocking and radical shift into unknown, unrecognizable territory. It catches our attention. It wants to make a point. The point of the story will vary according to how each generation interprets it. We have to remember, these are not literal stories. They are constructs using mythology as a literary vehicle to convey essential teachings in poetic fashion. These stories are the building blocks of our Jewish psyche. We have to be careful not to outright dismiss the Akedah as ridiculous, or alternatively to just see it as a literal request for the ultimate act of fidelity by an all powerful deity.

Abraham was not always a full believer in the voice of this vision. There is an evocative story in Genesis Chapter 15, where Abraham had lost faith in the vision. He had been successful in war, had freed his nephew Lot from captivity, was prosperous and respected by the kings and Chieftains around. However he and Sarah remained without child. The voice came to him and said “Al Tira Avraham, Anoichi Magen Loch” Have no fear Abraham, I will preserve and protect you. He was then lead outside, in the warm blackness of the desert night, and looked into the sky, laden with jeweled stars and deeply knew that his offspring would be as numerous. He began to put his full trust and belief, hook, line and sinker into his vision.

The miracles begin to unfold. Sarah conceives and bears child at age 90. Abraham and the voice of the vision form a “Brit Olam” an eternal covenant marked by the ceremony of circumcision.

At this point, there seem to be no limits to Abraham’s belief. No bounds or boundaries to his trust and love for God.

In the two sentences before the Akedah story, Abraham plants a tree in Be’er Sheva and begins to refer to God, his inner vision/voice, as Adonia, el Olam. The Hebrew word Olam translates on many levels. It is the word for our physical world, and a word that connotes eternal time. Abraham has established for the sake of the future Jewish people, an eternal covenant with a presence and a process, manifest within his life ,that transcends all space and time, all temporal and physical events.

So when God tests him and instructs him to offer up Isaac, he doesn’t question, he doesn’t hesitate. It is as if God is saying to him, does our covenant for the future, does our inseparable bond transcend your deepest attachments, your daily reality and morality?

Abraham is heading toward the mountain heights with God but he is leaving behind the valley where our lives take place. We want to shout at him, stop, what are you doing? Are you asleep? Have you lost your mind? Have you completely closed your heart ? Abraham

appears so lost in the entrancement of his vision that he is not aware of the dark shadow that has appeared alongside of the light.

The angel mercifully wakes him up. Allow me poetic liberties with her words. Abraham, Abraham, she calls. God now knows that you are willing to do anything for the sake of this covenantal relationship. You will be rewarded with a promise that your descendants will survive any and everything that this life can bring. Eventually at the end of the bigger story of the Jewish people, your descendants will be as numerous as the stars and bring universal blessings to all the nations of the world, but Abraham, for heavens sake, wake up, see what you are doing, become aware, open your eyes, this is your beloved son on the altar. This is not your only option. Look around you. There are other solutions, sacrifice the ram, and let the blowing of its horn be a message for thousands of years to come to awaken to the real, to our capacity for awareness, compassion and choice.

From the perspective of the valley, where we live, Abraham has lost his way. He has been blinded by his ideals and vision. He is willing to kill for them. He has betrayed his son and his family. His heart is closed to love. He has disconnected from the reality of life around him.

On Rosh Hashanah, we find ourselves in our typical human predicaments. We too have our shadows lurking. We often do not see with clarity the direct reality around us. We too can lose connection and close our hearts to those we love, while pursuing our desires of how we want life to be. We can suffer from ignorance, numbness, self-centeredness, cynicism or malice toward others.

We are not bad people. Perhaps for many of us in this tent our main problem is simply being asleep.

On Yom Kippur, when we look at the Al Het confessional, what is our first transgression? "Eemutz ha'lev". The closing of the heart. The second transgression? "B'li Da'ath" being unaware of what we do.

When we say the Al Het prayer, we lightly beat our heart with our hand. I don't believe the goal is to hit or punish ourselves. For me it is

more like knocking repeatedly on a door, the door of my heart, praying and begging to let it open, to feel the emotional and spiritual currents that are present, but hidden inside, safe in their slumber.

There is another, more basic reason that we go to sleep. Life itself has a shadow that is always lurking. It is called death. We don't know when or how it will come. We pray that it will be in a ripe old age, preferably in our sleep, surrounded by loving family.

But we don't know.

Life can change in an instant, in ways that we just don't want to think about. Illness, natural disasters, economic collapses, wars. No matter how we would like to cocoon our minds from these possibilities they exist as surely as shadows exist from the light of the sun.

In this way, perhaps the Akedah story, may be the ultimate story of Monotheism. It tells us : Understand that God, we can interchange the word Life for God, is one unity. All the beauty, love, goodness and creativity coexist with all the darkness heartbreak and destruction that life, human or natural, is capable of bringing.

How then do we hold this whole spectrum of existence together as one unity without shutting down, closing our hearts, splitting life into fragments of good and bad, light and shadow , or going to sleep?

Perhaps it is time to return to our archetypal fathers Abraham and Isaac and look at the Akedah , this time, from the perspective of the transcendent, from a spiritual lens that is mysteriously obscured from our everyday life and everyday consciousness.

Abraham's mission and purpose was not just finding a new land to populate with his decedents. Our founding father's mission was to cement an everlasting covenant, an unbreakable bond with an eternal vision, faith and conviction, lodged deep inside the Jewish psyche . A partnership with an inner orientation and belief system that can give meaning to and transcend anything that happens in this life.

We can see this heavenly perspective at work in the text of the story itself. There does not appear to be any anxiety or conflict on either

the part of Abraham or Isaac. There is a willingness to go to the edge of death itself with an equanimity. “Va’Yelchu shneihem yachdov” The two walked together in harmony. Isaac did not fight his fate, Abraham did not argue the mission. There appeared to be a shared belief that no matter how it turned out, it was a crucial part of a larger story that in the end, would turn out OK.

The El Olam, the ground of all being, A felt presence and process that, like love, hope, or faith, energizes the overwhelmed and gives meaning and hope to the hopeless. A vision that transcends all tragedy, all time and all space. A trajectory that starts with the creation of the world, which we celebrate today, and that ends with the tikkun, the perfection of this world at the end of days. A container so large that it can hold all of life, including death. A container that can hold all of our struggles, heartbreaks, emotions, limitations, our hopes and our joys.

The impact of this on the Jewish psyche is actually more of a common, yet mostly unconscious process in our daily lives. Let me give you an example. When we suffer the death of a loved one, what is one of our comforts as Jews? We say the Kaddish. We hold the finite, our lives, in the light of the Infinite and say, , “Yitgadal VYitkadash, Shemei Rabbah”. I will take some poetic liberties and translate this as meaning “We will elevate and we will sanctify the Great, Unknowable, Unnamable Eternal Presence and Process that underlies all reality as we know it.”

For this mythological marriage with eternity, for this place in the Jewish psyche, Abraham was willing to sacrifice anything and everything, including his beloved son. For this goal, Isaac walked together with him.

Now if transcendent God language is not part of your personal vocabulary, if mysticism does not resonate with you, we can move our focus inward. To an innate human capacity. A center within our own consciousness that holds wisdom, optimism, clarity, creativity and insight, no matter what is going on our life. In other words, the capacity to inwardly transcend, if only for a brief moment of time, the immediate circumstances of life and hold a larger perspective of acceptance, hope, faith and trust.

We can call this place by many names. We can call it our higher human capacity or our inner spirit. We can refer to it as a transcendent presence and process within which we live, or we can use the traditional term, God. It is our discovery of this place, our nurturance of it and ultimately our willingness to form a holy, covenantal relationship to it that puts us on the spiritual journey of life.

At the end of Yom Kippur we will all declare the shema. We will declare that Adonai is Echad, Adonai is One. The transcendent vision promised to our father Abraham, the eternal, the limitless is not separate from our time bound and limited lives.

It is all One. What we look for on the outside of ourselves can also be found on the inside.

Today, we prepare ourselves for Yom Kippur. On that day we will look deeply into our lives and hearts and reveal to ourselves our limitations and our transgressions. The ways in which we have stepped off the path of life and love.

If you need a course correction, hold them up to the light of the eternal values of equality, justice and righteousness. If you feel badly about yourself, if you are emotionally hurting, hold your heart up to the eternal light of kindness, love, compassion and forgiveness. If you want the above, but just cannot feel it, say a prayer and knock on the door of your heart. Keep knocking, never stop and sooner or later the spirit inside will open it, if only out of curiosity about the visitor who so badly wants to enter.

