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Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY Rosh Hashanah 2022-5783

*“Return Again”*

*Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.*

*Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are,*

*Born and reborn again*

*Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.*

On rare occasions, I’ve spoken here on Rosh Hashanah about the journey of Abraham and Isaac up the sacred mountain and down again. That story is known as the Binding of Isaac, in Hebrew *Akedat Yitzchak*, or simply *ha-Akedah*. It is tomorrow’s Torah reading, entirely set up by today’s reading. Because I know that Andrea Ritchin will be delving into the Haftarah text tomorrow and not the *Akedah*, she gave me permission to go there today.

My intention is not to give a close reading of the entire saga, but rather to do a sort of surgical strike on a few key points in the text. I want to ask what might be an obvious question, and to give my question a fairly obvious answer.

The question is: why does our tradition direct us to read *this* story on Rosh Hashanah? By the time I’ve given my answer, you’ll rightly think that we should in fact be reading it on Yom Kippur instead.

When you hear the story or read it tomorrow, you won’t find any references to Rosh Hashanah or the penitential season per se. You won’t find any notions of Creation or the birthday of the world. You won’t find any clues as to what time of year the story takes place. It could be any season. That’s part of the point. It is detached from all time and space, because it is a story about here and now, wherever and whenever *your* own here and now happen to be.

Yes, there is a heroic ram in the story, a *deus ex machina* that pulls the narrative together by sacrificing itself in Isaac’s stead. The ram appears by being caught by its horn. The horn becomes the shofar, and thus the symbol of Rosh Hashanah, and thus the reference the Torah makes in the Book of Numbers to *yom t’ru’ah*, a day of blasting the horn. Is that the connection to Rosh Hashanah?

But no, the *t'ru'ah* itself is not in this story. No horn is blown here. Unlike today's parashah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, where the lad Ishmael cries out for water (like a *t'ruah*) and Hagar the desperate mother cries out for divine intervention (maybe like a *sh'varim*), no sounds punctuate the silence of the *Akedah*.

For medieval Jews trembling in fear of marauding Crusaders, the hero is not the ram but Isaac. Isaac takes what's coming to him. He demonstrates unwavering faith in God's inscrutable plan. He is silent, other than to ask his father where the sacrificial animal might be. He asks politely and does not respond when told tersely that God will provide a lamb. His stoic compliance becomes the survival strategy for a thousand years' worth of slaughtered Jews.

But those Jews trembled in fear *all* year, not just on these holy days. Still no connection to Rosh Hashanah.

Is Abraham perhaps the hero? He trusts in God's will, even though he has shown himself to be a competent opponent of God's commandments in the past. Now he is almost obscenely obedient. Perhaps that is a sort of heroism. But it is not a High Holy Day theme in the main.

I should mention here that my dear teacher, Rabbi Professor Lawrence Hoffman, a world-renowned expert on Jewish liturgy, believes that the *Akedah* came to be read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah for the following reason: Rosh Hashanah, like all Biblical holy days, was once one day in length. Its assigned Torah reading was the birth of Isaac, Genesis chapter 21. In the Diaspora, Jews began observing two days of every holy day, including Rosh Hashanah. (And in fact, it is the only holy day observed for two days in Israel today.) So, says Dr. Hoffman, the Torah was already turned to Chapter 21, and the Jews simply continued on Day 2 with Chapter 22, the *Akedah*. Over time, its frightening theme became the defining story of our new year.

I personally believe that the Rabbis picked the *Akedah* not because of heroes, nor because of convenience, but because of language. The Rabbis loved language. They literally "loved" the Torah, knowing full well that the Torah – this object of their doting – was made up entirely of letters and words. And of the games those words play on the imaginative mind.

Three times in this tightly packed story, we see variations on the word "turn." Or, "return." In Hebrew, *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* had already become the theme of the

Days of Awe for these Rabbis, more than Creation, more than the calendar, more than the blowing of a horn or the expiation of guilt and sin. Just “turning” and “returning,” laden and loaded with all their delicious ambiguity.

(And yes, you are correct to hear echoes of “turn it and turn it for everything is in it.”)

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Abraham travels three days with his son, his servant lads, his donkey, his long sacrificial knife, and his flint and firewood. When he reaches the point of no return (pun intended), he turns to the servant lads (pun intended) and says: *sh’vu lachem po im hachamor*. A literal reading would yield: “Remain here with the donkey.”

But the imperative verb *sh’vu* explodes in the Hebrew listener’s brain. *Sh’vu* means more than “remain.” It means “return.” Return here, to where you are, dear servant lads. Do *teshuvah* here, where you existentially find yourselves at this moment, unaware as you are of the huge implications of this moment, incapable as you may be of grasping the meaning of this moment, uninformed of the enormous role you are about to play in cosmic history, just as are we all incapable of understanding our lives in full while we are in the middle of living them.

Wherever else you are, young lads, return to here and now, and prepare yourselves for the incomprehensible, which is to say, for the unknowable lives you are about to lead, as are all young people starting out life. *Sh’vu lachem po*, return yourselves to here, and do not depart from this place without having undergone the thoughtful growth you must do.

So, the first “commandment” of this story, if you will, is *sh’vu lachem po*, locate yourselves in this place in time and space, and struggle to absorb the meaning of this unique time and place in your unique life.

We are the lads. We figure into the larger story in ways we will never truly understand.

*Sh’vu lachem po*. Return to *where* you are.

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Before Abraham ascends the upward path, he informs the lads – and he knows Isaac is overhearing him – that “the lad and I will go up and worship, and...*v'nashuvah aleichem*. We will come back to the two of you.

But again the word explodes the brain. *V'nashuvah* means “we will do *teshuvah*. We - i.e. Isaac and I - will turn our entire lives around in the act of coming back to this place. We will come back here, but we will not be the same people who left you. We will not be the same, and neither will you.

You, dear servant boys, will be the touchstones, the measures of *our* own change. When we come back to you, you will be right here, but we will have seen and heard and felt things that will render it impossible for us to go on with our lives as they have been up to this point.

I don't need to recount the story for you. If you haven't heard it, you will hear it tomorrow. There's no spoiler alert. You know that both Abraham and Isaac survive the ordeal, but that they descend the mountain separately. And yes, they are both changed forever, and not only in good ways.

Their story becomes an automatic metaphor for the entire Jewish people, and for anyone who dares to read their tale and imagine themselves in it.

Therefore the second mitzvah or commandment of the story is *v'nashuvah aleichem*. We will return to you. Not just an amorphous returning, but a specific returning to the place we began, so as to take full measure of the enormous changes we have undergone, both those we intended and those that overtook us against our will.

*V'nashuva aleichem*: Return to *what* you are.

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The third and final moment of turning in our tale is hidden in the stage directions. Abraham has been redirected away from slaughtering Isaac. He has slaughtered the ram and burned its body as a fragrant offering. Isaac goes his own way. Abraham, true to his promise, returns to his obedient lads and the donkey. Well, not quite true to his promise. He is alone, while he promised that “we shall return.”

But we cannot always keep the entirety of our promises, either to others or to ourselves. “Real life” gets in the way. We aspire to much, and we accomplish some of what we set out to do. Abraham very much wants our text to say

*vayashuvu Avraham v'Yitzchak b'no*, “and Abraham and his son returned,” in the plural.

But alas, it is written in the singular. Abraham, in striving to achieve something remarkable with his son, falls short of his goal. His son has his own plans, his own ideas. His own take on what just happened, and therefore his own response to it. His own *teshuvah*, as it were. Abraham must settle for second-best. He returns alone, penitent and chastened. The waiting lads attest to the fact that not so much has changed after all.

The third of the three mitzvot or commandments in our story is *vayashov*, “and he returned alone.” It is the commandment to deal with the failure of our attempts to truly turn and return, to truly change and stay changed, to truly influence others to see our hopeful vision and follow us up the holy mountain - by nonetheless going forward, going onward, even if we cannot bring everyone in our orbit with us.

Abraham is hardly a failure. He has most certainly made a difference in his son's life, and even in the lives of the waiting servants. History will record that he took an unprecedented risk, that he reached for the stars, that he dared to show the world - starting with his own inheriting generation - that the God of compassion and *menschlichkeit* wants sacrifice but not sacrifices; turning and returning, but not turning away or turning inward.

His son will learn some of what he taught. Future generations will learn about turning in all its manifestations, and they will struggle mightily through the eons to make their turning stick.

Abraham himself will only learn his own lesson up to a point, after which he too will slide more than a bit backward toward the mediocre self he started out with. Alas, *vayashov Avraham* may mean both “and Abraham did *teshuvah*” and “and Abraham went backward.”

*Vayashov Avraham*: Return to *who* you are.

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Now you see why the Akedah is more a text for Yom Kippur than Rosh Hashanah. Or more precisely, it's more a text for the conclusion of Rosh Hashanah insofar as it points us in the direction of Yom Kippur. Its three commandments: *sh'vu lachem po* (begin your turning right here where you are); *v'nashuvah aleichem* (we will return to you changed); and *vayashov* (he returned

alone), all point to the frustratingly difficult task of trying to grow as human beings, and to stimulate growth among those we love and those for whom we are responsible.

It is a story of both aspiration and of realistic expectations. It is the greatest Jewish story: of aiming high, of failing miserably, and of aiming upward once again.

The hero, if there needs to be a hero beyond language itself, is all of us. All of us, that is, daring to believe that if we try hard enough, explain well enough, and make ourselves be patient enough, then our children and grandchildren and students and friends - and maybe even some of our enemies - will accompany us on a journey toward what we know to be good and true and right. Daring to believe that among those who follow our dream will be our own selves, who this year will finally keep going forward and not slipping backward. Daring to believe that no matter how much older we have gotten, how much nearer we have come to the end of our "brilliant" careers, and how much less strength remains in our courageous souls and bodies, that we can once again make the sacred journey around the sun, the journey we Jews stubbornly and persistently call *t'shuvah*.

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