

Akedat Yitzchak – Once Again

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When we think of Rosh Hashanah, many associations come to mind. Prayers like *Avinu Makleinu* that we sing once a year, sermons, teachings, and the talk given by the president of the Temple. The dream of every rabbi, of course, is to teach something so powerful that the congregation will think about it for a long time. The dream of every cantor is to sing a prayer so that its music and its sound will haunt us for some time (I can testify for both). Yes, the power of music and a teaching will stay with us, we will hear the sound of the prayer into the night, and we will talk about the sermon at the dinner table, but it is not at this level that we experience *Rosh Hashanah*. *Rosh Hashanah* enters us through something much more powerful, the sound that comes to us from a long-long time ago, the sound that made our forefathers and foremothers tremble, the sound that gets underneath our skin and shakes our whole being every year. This is the sound of the *shofar*.

The *shofar* came to us from the story of *Akedah*, the story of binding of Isaac by his father Abraham, which we read a few minutes ago. The story ends with Abraham sacrificing the ram instead of his son. According to the tradition, we blow that ram's horn, the *shofar*. To hear the *shofar* blown is the special *mitzvah* of *Rosh Hashanah*. Just think about it, with all the sophisticated musical instruments, with all the advanced technology that goes into music production today, nothing touches us deeper than a simple ram's horn, an ancient wind-instrument. The primitive and simple sound of the *shofar* spiritually touches us on this day of soul-searching, repentance and judgment.

Yesterday, we all call out three different names and the shofar blower, Paul Roberts, made three distinct sounds in response: *tekiah*, *shevarim* and *teruah*. *Tekiah* is the sound of one long blast, *shevarim* are three medium, wailing sounds, and the nine quick blasts in short succession are called *teruah*. These three different sounds represent three different themes of *Rosh Hashanah*. Many commentaries have been written on that topic. I would like to share with you what touches me the most, what makes me tremble.

Tekiah-the long, straight blast-is the sound of G-d's coronation as the King of the universe. This sound reminds us to acknowledge G-d's presence in the world at every given moment. We understand that not everything depends on us and our actions. G-d's presence is an unexplainable force that holds this world of harmony and beauty together and us in unity. The sound of *tekiah* proclaims that power (shofar blast).

For many of us, the idea of a "king" triggers the image of a greedy and power-hungry despot who wants to subjugate the people for his selfish aims. In our tradition, a king is first and foremost a servant of the people. According to our tradition, G-d is lonely and needs us and this is why G-d created us, humans, in the first place. G-d needs our prayers and our belief in G-d.

The second sound *shevarim* are the three medium, wailing blasts. Kabbalists believe that *shevarim* represent the sobbing cry of the Jewish heart, the yearning to connect with G-d (shofar blast). As G-d needs us, so too do we need G-d. Any

relationship, whether it is between two people or between G-d and a human, brings the two together. Instead of two, we become one. Yes, in some ways, we lose our individuality for the sake of the relationship. Yes, it means that one can not blast the radio in the car, or put the windows down all the way because it destroys our hairstyles that we spend so much time fixing (I am sure many women can relate to this), not to mention, losing the unanimous power over the remote control.

But think what we gain. In a healthy relationship, we balance each other, we support each other, we push each other to be a better people, and we learn and grow together. In other words, each of us becomes stronger.

On the other hand, we all aware of the possibility of the unhealthy relationship. What happens when we are in this one to one relationship too much? What happens when we are so focused on each other that we do not notice the world around us or the other people in our lives? I believe that this is what the story of *Akedat Yitzchak*-the story of binding of Isaac teaches us. For generations, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians have struggled with this chapter in Genesis trying to understand its intention.

We read this story every year on Rosh Hashanah; we also read it once a year during our Torah discussions on Shabbat morning, but the question remains do we know what really happened? You could ask me if I know what really happened.... No, no I was not there on the mountain along with Abraham and Isaac, nor was I with Sarah crying and holding her in my arms waiting for their return. Let me share with you, the way I see this story.

Abraham's relationship to G-d is very strong, too strong, in my opinion. G-d puts Abraham through a test-*nissah*, one of ten other tests, according to rabbis.

Another of those tests occurs when G-d is about to destroy the wicked city of Sodom and G-d consults Abraham. In chapter 18, verse 17, G-d says: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" So, *Adonai* shares G-d's plan with Abraham. In response, Abraham challenges G-d and says: "Will the Judge of the entire earth not do justice?" After that, Abraham makes sure that more lives will be saved, and he does not stop arguing with G-d until G-d agrees with him on saving ten people. If G-d finds 10 righteous people in Sodom, the entire city will be saved, "I will not destroy for the sake of the ten" (Gen. 18:32) G-d says. In the story of Sodom and Gomorra, Abraham does not think of himself, he is not afraid to argue with G-d even putting himself in danger by possibly making G-d angry with him, perhaps; and thus by speaking on behalf of the people of Sodom, Abraham passes the test.

In our story, the story of *Akedah*, Abraham is silent. Silence in this story speaks louder than words. G-d called Abraham's name and Abraham says: "*hineini*." Hebrew word "*hineini*" means "here I am" but implies more. It implies that Abraham is there in his completeness- his body, his soul; his entire being is there before *Adonai*. Abraham does not argue with G-d. Instead, in silence, he gets up early in the morning, *vayashkeim Avraham baboker*, he takes Isaac and two of his servants and they travel for three days to the mountain of Moriah. Why did Abraham get up so early in the morning? Our sages say, so that he can leave while Sarah is still asleep and does not ask any questions. Clearly, Abraham wants to hide from Sarah what he is about to do. If we could just imagine Abraham's thoughts, they would be something like this: "After all, G-d did not talk to Sarah, but to me instead," or "Oh, she is just a woman and won't understand."

But, more likely, this version: “She will understand, after all, she is a prophetess just like me, Abraham. But she will stop me from showing my complete dedication to *Adonai*. And she won’t let me do it, to sacrifice our only child, Isaac.” Abraham is very lonely in this story. He is not able to talk to Sarah or Isaac about this whole matter. When Isaac asks his father: “Where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham answer is: “G-d will see to a lamb for an offering, my son.”

For not speaking up to G-d, Abraham pays the price. We never hear from Sarah again. *Midrash* teaches us, that while Abraham and Isaac were on the mountain, Satan appears to Sarah and tells her what Abraham is doing at that very moment, “Sarah’s soul left her” (Gen R. 62:3), she died while Satan was still speaking to her. Isaac never recovered fully either. The *Midrash* teaches us that while Isaac was bound to the altar, angels were crying over his destiny. One tear fell into Isaac’s eye and he became blind. We also know that Abraham and Isaac left the mountain of Moriah separately and never have spoken again.

Abraham almost lost his son, Isaac, and he lost his wife, Sarah. I am not questioning Abraham’s love for Sarah or for Isaac. The *Torah* lets us know that Abraham’s love for Isaac is very strong. It describes Isaac as “*et-yechidcha asher ahavta*,” which means, “the beloved, dearest, and the only son” of Abraham. Instead, I am questioning Abraham’s love to G-d. What kind of love is it? Is it a healthy kind of love? Or, is it a little extreme?

As another example, I would like to share with you something that happened to me. In 1994, I moved to Jerusalem for a year in order to study at Hebrew Union College at the cantorial school. For the first 6 months my daughter, Stacy, came with me. Closer to the end of the semester, somewhere around December, I understood that if she continued to stay with me, I would not be able to pass my exams. With the heavy heart, I had to send Stacy back to the United States, to my parents. Soon after, I had an exam on chanting the story of *Akedah*, the very same story of Abraham and Isaac, with the High Holiday trope. I had a lot of catching up to do and after Stacy left, very eagerly; I went home and set down to study for the exam. When I finally reached the middle of the story, where we read that Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood, bound his son Isaac, and placed him on the altar on the top of the wood (Gen.22:8), I started crying. I felt like I had sacrificed Stacy, I gave up my flesh and my blood for the school and my dream of becoming a cantor, just as Abraham did with Isaac.

I worked very hard for days; trying to concentrate on my work. But no matter what I did, I could not sing past that spot in the story. My roommates heard my sobbing through the door and in great concern called my professor, Eli Schleifer. I explained to him what was happening and asked if he could give me a different passage to chant for the exam. I did pass the exam, but this is not the point.

Since then I told this story on a few occasions, and every time I retell the story- I re-live the experience, and thus, I re-live the pain. I feel enormous guilt and grief for sending my daughter back home. Can you imagine the pain that Abraham feels when he is just about to kill his “beloved and only son?” Also, we have to ask ourselves if G-d really wants this closeness to G-d self. Is this the type of relationship that *Adonai* wants with us? God is lonely, but we would be even lonelier if we sacrifice our families and friends for the sake of *Hashem*, for the sake of our jobs, our careers, or our hobbies.

According to Maimonides, “G-d’s only concern is that people live in happiness and harmony. G-d’s decrees and laws are only for the good of the people, not for G-d self.”

In the beginning of the Torah, the relationship between G-d and humans was very close. G-d created Adam, the earthling-the first human being. G-d’s created Adam with G-d’s own hands shaping and breathing air into Adam’s nostrils. We know that Enoch and later Noah walked with G-d, whatever that means. The point is that the relationship between G-d and us, humans, began as a very close relationship in a physical sense. Today, many of us do not have such a close connection to G-d. Most of us do not hear G-d’s voice and we do not go hiking with *Adonai*. Sometimes it is hard to know and to feel we are on the right path.

To help us to choose the right path come the third *shofar* sound-the *teruah* sound. The *teruah* sound is the one that sounds like an alarm clock-9 quick blasts in short succession. It wakes us up from our spiritual slumber and gives us alertness, focus, and clarity- so we can awaken to life, physically and spiritually, and to have clarity in our choices.

I am sure, from time to time, we all find ourselves in the shoes of Abraham when we have to choose between people in our lives and our jobs and our dreams. I hope that this year, for all of us, the sounds of the *shofar*-will remind us of our voice in speaking out, whether we speak with G-d or we listen to the voice within us. May the *shofar* sound stay with us this year (shofar blast).

Shanah Tova, U’metukah