

Erev Rosh Hashanah

5768

A rabbi has two basic choices when the Yamim Noraim approach. Do I want to agitate or inspire? Do I want to remind myself, and all of you that our world is filled with injustice and we have a lot of work to do? Or do I strive to share the gems of Yidishkeit, the riches of Torah, tefillah-prayer, story, in such a way that we are filled with insight and understanding? You may be relieved to hear that at least for tonight, I've chosen the latter.

For the past 3 years, I have had the great privilege of teaching, and learning, Torah every week with a fascinating group of people. Some come every week, some drop in when they can and some are in the room even when they are not physically present. Each person has their unique life experience, which informs what verse of Torah moves them and how they understand Torah. Over the years I have witnessed the change in perspective and the questions that arise from week to week. Why are we gathering to learn Torah?

Eytz chaim hee..

Because Torah is our living tree. It is our roots and our leaves, the past and the future, but above all it is the present.

Almost ten years ago, my husband was offered a new job and he was struggling with the decision. He had been working for the State of CA for almost 25 years and it was hard to know if it was time for a change. Our good friend Shlomo advised him to check what parsha we were reading that week. So

Richard looked in the Torah and it was parshat Lech L'cha-The story of leaving behind what is familiar. Hearing a call to trust the unknown and have faith in what would later be revealed. Now that was a pretty clear message. And that's just touching the surface-the p'shat, the outer layer of Torah. The deeper meaning of the words lech l'cha is the invitation to go deep inside, the challenge to reveal the true nature of our full potential. If Richard wanted to grow professionally, this parsha was encouraging him to take the risk of faith. We only discover our faith through our willingness to take risks. Richard explored his ability to express his faith in the blessing of new possibilities and in the opportunity to discover his own hidden talents.

Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches that each weekly Torah portion brings us a blessing, a challenge and an opportunity for spiritual growth. Torah is an inspiring guide to finding our way through the landscape of our lives... and finding the Torah in us.

This is why we read Torah, year after year. For as we change, we find new lessons in the text. Each time I encounter the text anew, I find a different message and a different aspect of myself waiting to be examined. I don't think that I was ready to understand the Akedah in the way I feel it in my guts this year as we prepare to send Daniel off to college for the first time. Questions concerning the relationship between parents and children are particularly close to my heart today.

As children, we learn the stories from the first two books of Torah. We remember the names of the patriarchs and matriarchs, we know about Moses

and the struggle for liberation from the Exodus story. I don't know about you, but I don't think I ever learned in Hebrew school about our journey in the wilderness or the roots of the Jewish commitment to social justice found in Numbers and Deuteronomy. I knew we cared about working to improve the world but I didn't realize this caring was connected to the spiritual path of Torah. As an adult, I now recognize that the verse, "be kind to the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" is repeated 36 times. When I work for immigrant rights, I draw upon the mitzvot found in Numbers and Deuteronomy. When I feed the homeless, I am following the laws about leaving the corners of the field for the poor that are central to the Torah's mission of teaching the people while still in the wilderness how to structure their future, just community.

What do the sections of Torah we read on the Yamim Noraim have to teach us? How can we see the stories we read during these ten days reflected in our lives? What are the lessons we learn from what our ancestors did right and maybe more importantly from their mistakes? Tomorrow morning Rabbi Rick will be teaching the story of Abraham and Sarah's interactions with Hagar and Ishmael. This is the traditional reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. This evening I want to spend our time exploring the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, traditionally read on the second day of Rosh HaShanah.

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guts this year as we prepare to send Daniel off to college for the first time. Questions concerning the relationship between parents and children are particularly close to my heart today and they are at the heart of this story.

This section of Torah is disturbing, complicated and multi-layered. Here's the basic outline of the story:

God asks Abraham to take his son "Your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and get you into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering...."

Abraham and Isaac rise early in the morning – (too early for Sarah to notice their departure?) – and travel three days – until they reach the appointed place.

Abraham prepares the altar, binds his son, and just before sacrificing Isaac, Abraham's hand is stayed by the voice of an angel who says, "Lay not your hand upon the lad..." And Abraham lifted his eyes, saw a ram caught in the thicket by his horns and offered him up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Here are the questions I am asking this year:

What happens when parents and children stop speaking with one another? Did Abraham make the right decision in bringing his son Isaac as a sacrifice? In what ways do we sacrifice our children and their dreams? What are reasonable sacrifices that parents make for children and children make for parents?

Let's look at the book of Genesis for a moment. There are a number of very disturbing and violent interactions in this first book of Torah. The first is a murder of a brother by his own brother, followed by the near murder of a brother

by a brother, then another near murder of a brother by his brothers. There is a rape, two incestuous seductions, kidnapping, slave traffic and endless jealousy.

So when we listen to the story of the Akedah on the second day of RH, the power of this tale evokes a strong response. So strong, that we often miss a key verse in the story. We find it towards the beginning of the story. When Abraham and Isaac leave on their journey to Mount Moriah, we read, "They both walked together". What a contrast to other the interactions I mentioned before. The problem is, we miss this sweet description because we know where they are going. We know the purpose of the trip. What was Abraham feeling as they walked together? Remember how long he and Sarah had waited to have a child. And this journey took three days, enough time for Abraham to reconsider. And we find the verse repeated. Before ascending the mountain Abraham turns to his servants traveling with them and says, "We will return to you". He takes the wood and the fire and here is the repetition of our verse "the two of them go together".

We know what happens on the mountain and when the voice comes from above we breathe a sigh of relief.

But what happens after the dramatic intervention? The text reads, "Abraham returned to his servants." Now wait a minute. Isn't someone missing? We don't find our verse repeated- the two of them did not go down together.

What happened to Isaac?

The next section in Torah, which we don't read during the holidays, tells us of Sarah's death. Some commentators assume that she died of a broken heart when she heard that her husband almost sacrificed their son.

And nowhere in the text do we hear of any further contact between Abraham and Isaac. The two of them never go together again. Why doesn't the father of the Jewish people ever have any more contact with his own son? The binding of Isaac puts the whole family in a bind.

A few years ago, a good friend told me that he felt we needed to move beyond the story of the Akedah. Why do we still need to read this horrific tale over and over again? I contend that if the Torah is a tree of life, there must be some message here that is still relevant for us today.

While one of the traditional responses to this story affirms Abraham's success in passing the test of faith Gd sets before him by being willing to sacrifice Isaac, there are some traditional commentaries that say Abraham got it all wrong. Rashi, the outstanding Biblical commentator of the Middle Ages, brings our attention to one crucial word in the story. The Hebrew word, olah, can mean two things. An olah is a burnt offering and in the story of the Akedah, it is the word used for sacrifice in Gd's instruction to Abraham concerning Isaac. But the word olah also means something that is elevated or brought up. When a person is called up to Torah, they are honored with an aliyah. In a midrash quoted by Rashi we read about a conversation between Abraham and Gd in which God demonstrates to Abraham that his command was not to slaughter Isaac, but only to "Bring him up." In this midrashic conversation Gd continues to

say to Abraham, “Now that you have brought him up, take him down.” Maybe Gd was actually asking Abraham to bring Isaac up to the mountain so that he could instruct him about how to offer an olah-a sacrifice.

I was shocked to learn that Rashi had his own questions about Abraham’s actions in preparing to sacrifice his son. While focusing on the particular language in this story is one way to interpret Torah, we must delve deeper if we are to find a convincing reason to keep reading this difficult story every year, and especially on one of the most important holidays in the Jewish Calendar.

As I mentioned, there is more than enough family dysfunction to go around in the book of Genesis. But this story asks us to examine the sacrifices we make for our families, and the ways in which we sacrifice our family relationships.

Rabbi Gunther Plaut teaches that the story of the Akedah can be understood as a paradigm of a parent/child relationship: In a way every parent seeks to control his child and is in danger of seeking to sacrifice the child to his or her own dreams. In this story, there is divine intervention but what keeps parents from sacrificing their child’s unique choices to conform to what is reasonable from the parent’s perspective? The fact that we don’t know much about Isaac’s age or status creates the possibility for us to imagine Isaac as standing for all children – whatever their age or characteristics and however they get along with their parents. Furthermore, the minimal dialogue or motivation attributed to Abraham allows him to stand for all fathers, all parents.

The story also asks us to consider the kinds of sacrifices parents make for their children. In *The Hero Within*, Carol Pearson writes, the capacity to sacrifice, like any skill always needs some fine tuning. It is one thing to sacrifice briefly one's sleep to comfort a child with a bad dream; it is quite another for a mother to sacrifice her career for a child. It is one thing for a father to sacrifice his desire to go fishing today because he needs to go to work to feed the family; it is quite another to work for forty years at a job he hates. **Often such massive sacrifice, is a result of an inability to discriminate between giving what is necessary and life giving and giving that brings death to the martyr and thus to those around them.**

Divine intervention in the story of the Akedah helps us understand this message. While Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, he did not have to make the utmost sacrifice. As family members we are taught the difference between willingness to sacrifice and the recognition that it isn't always the right choice because it isn't always necessary.

My husband and I have often joked that family members not speaking to each other is the modern plague of Jewish families. But from the conclusion of the Akedah, Abraham descending the mountain alone teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun. Abraham sacrificed relationships with his family members for his decision to follow what he believed was God's command. As I mentioned, Sara dies right after this section of Torah and we never hear any mention of Isaac or Ishmael having contact with their father. The tragedy is that

in our sanctuary today, my extended family included, we still have family members who don't speak with each other.

Who can find fault with the possibility that Isaac decided he could not longer stay in relationship with his father? After Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father. Don't we have relatives we only see at funerals?

Maybe this is another reason why we read this section of Torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. To remind us that there are lines we should not cross because if we do, we risk tearing the fabric of our families. These ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide us with the opportunity to explore our family relationships so that we may clear up past mistakes and make more conscious decisions moving into the future.

The final lesson we can find in this story is related to the following reading of the text. In commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only one, Isaac, whom he loves, God also commands Abraham to sacrifice himself. He asks Abraham to confront and to discard the basic illusion of human existence, that Abraham, and we ourselves, can control the show. This illusion is fostered by everyday experience until tragedy strikes, until we confront the reality of our own powerlessness and our own death.

So did Abraham get it right?

The ultimate answer is that spiritual truth is not rigid. Our spirit can be opened from many directions. In the words of the Talmud: Elu va Elu divrei elohim chayim. Both are the words of the living God. The Talmud teaches us that

seemingly contradictory truths can provide different windows onto Torah. All spiritual paths are filled with this paradox.

Jews have long understood that if we limit ourselves to a literal reading of the text, not only do we run into philosophical and moral problems, we impoverish ourselves spiritually. Shivim panim latorah - there are 70 faces of Torah. And the faces are our new and changed faces when we come to the same stories year after year.

A few weeks ago Rabbi Shifra and I sat together at the Catalyst waiting for the Matisyahu concert to begin. We greeted some of our Hebrew High students who stared in amazement at old fogies like us (no less rabbis) attending such a hip event. Rabbis Shifra informed me that two of these students told her they'd like to take a serious Torah study class at Hebrew High next semester. I jumped at the opportunity to teach the class and we discussed inviting Hebrew High parents to join us. What would it be like to look at the story of the Akedah with teenagers and parents together around the table? What faces would we redeem from the text?

Here's a glimpse of what might be possible. About a month ago, the Thursday Torah class read a section about the transition of the High Priest from Aaron to his son Eliezer. The text says that Moses, Aaron and Eliezer ascend the mountain and since Aaron is soon to die, he is stripped of his priestly garments and they are transferred to Aaron's son Eliezer. One of our eldest members of the class piped up saying, "That seems pretty rude". Why is he stripped of his garments? To which the youngest member of our group replied

that receiving a parent's garments upon their death is quite precious for both the parent and the child. What some members of the class did not know is that this young person's mother died a number of years ago, when she was still a teenager. The elder and the young person were both right. From their different life experience, they read that text, as it was true from both perspectives.

I pray that when we hear the Torah portion chosen by the rabbis for these holidays, we can open our minds and our hearts to the multi-vocal nature of the texts. Applying the Torah to our lives and our lives to Torah.

Eytz chayim hee, l'machazikim bah

It is a tree of life for all who embrace it

V'tomcheha, m'ushar

And her supporters are m'ushar.

How can we translate the meaning of osher?

It's related to happiness, but not smiley faces and rainbows.

Some translate is as fortunate.

Most importantly for our context, the word ashir, spelled with an ayin instead of an aleph means rich. When Hebrew words are so close in their spelling we know there is a strong relationship between them/

This ashir is not the kind of rich that is based upon material wealth.

When we hold on to Torah, our lives are enriched. When we share the stories and laws in Torah as they apply to our own lives, we receive the richness of Torah. When we challenge the text and truly embrace it on our own terms and

learn that Jewish tradition doesn't have one understanding of Torah, we are enriched.

Torah is a tree of life for all who embrace it

And as we do so, our lives are enriched

