

Rosh HaShanah | 5781/2020
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Virtual services
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Akedat Yitzchak: Drash and Breakout Room Program

Shanah tovah.

Usually when we ponder the Akedat Yitzchak or the story of the Binding of Isaac by his father Abraham, we think about the difficult questions of why Abraham would go along with what seems to us an insane act, even if directed by G-d. Or we may think, "What did Sarah say to Abraham when Yitzchak told her?" Or, was Yitzchak scarred for life? These are certainly worthy angles from which to ponder this nearly incomprehensible story. I want to stretch us in somewhat different directions.

Rav Ammon Bazak, a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion just south of Jerusalem, comments that this event is really part two of a two-part event. He connects it to the banishing of Yishmael, Abraham's first son with his handmaid, Hagar, about whom we read in yesterday's Torah portion. In both cases, Hashem challenges Abraham. In both cases they occur early in the morning, and perhaps in both cases, a malach shel Shamayim or an angel of the Heavens calls out and then something is observed. In the case of Yishmael, the angel called out and Hagar noticed the container of water to help her and her son. In the case of Yitzchak, the angel stays the hand of Abraham, and Abraham notices the ram caught in the thickets that he can sacrifice in place of Yitzchak. Rav Bazak astutely points out that, at end of each story, there is an indication that the boys will marry. Moreover, G-d makes promises to both boys that they will become a great nation.

There is no doubt that Abraham loves both his sons, but yet he is asked to give both of them up. At some point in both events, there was a moment at which both boys recognized that their lives were going to change forever at the hands of their father.

According to a discussion held at Machon Hadar, the Akedah represents a demonstration of ultimate obedience and faith.

As for Sarah, the Torah suggests that Abraham settled in Beersheva and we don't hear about Sarah again until the parashah Chayyei Sarah, the life of Sarah, which actually begins with her dying. Some sages suggest that when she heard what Abraham had done to her only son, their beloved son, that she died instantly.

Were Isaac and Yishmael scarred by their experiences with their father? We don't know, but we know that Yitzchak and Yishmael did come together to bury their father, Abraham.

Some historians dismiss our moral concerns about the Akedah Yitzchak, the binding of Isaac, by saying that we should not look at this experience through our 2020 lens and reminding us that child sacrifice worldwide was not at all rare at the time.

The Akedah story has served many generations of our People as a tangible, living memory that has provided inspiration in those many situations down through the ages when we have been put to the test. We are reminded in our Passover Haggadah that in every generation a power has risen up to destroy us, but the Jewish People unto us, in this day, lives. This dynamic role fulfilled by the Akedah narrative can also teach us something about the attitude of Judaism toward history.

Hannah lost her seven sons during the persecutions by Antiochus Epiphanes, because they refused to worship idols. This is the same Antiochus we know from the story of Chanukah. Hannah can look at Abraham and say, "For you, it was a trial; for me it was reality." She was tested just as Abraham was, but the hand of G-d did not stay the sacrifice.

In his 1971 book, *Sefer Gzeirot Ashkenaz v'Zorefat*, A.M. Haberman relates that at the time of the First Crusade in the year 1096 of the Common Era, as the Crusaders traveled across Europe to the Holy Land in order to liberate it from the Muslim "heretics" as part of worldwide strategy for extending Christianity, they encountered many Jewish communities on their way. They did not see us as significantly different from the Muslims. In contrast to the more modern Holocaust, the Crusaders offered us a choice of either accepting Jesus as our savior or the name of Israel would be no more.

Rather than being baptized, most Jews preferred the sacrifice to sanctify G-d's Name. Stories and poems are written in both Hebrew and Latin of how these Jews, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, made the decision to follow the example of our more ancient forebears on Masada and sacrificed one another and committed suicide of these communities.

In each of these Akedah-like stories, and many others across the ages, we Jews continue to connect ourselves to the path of Abraham, through sacrifice, to commit ourselves to the Oneness of G-d. Through their conduct, they demonstrate complete awareness of the meaning of their actions. They are definitely, wholeheartedly imitating the image of Abraham and, in fact, even competing to outdo him, but nonetheless creating a historical and spiritual connection to our father Abraham.

One can establish almost a hierarchy of Akedah in which Abraham's encounter is actually at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid. He showed willingness but didn't actually follow through with the sacrifice. Hannah actually gave up her seven sons, but they were taken by an enemy. And our European coreligionists might be placed at the top of the pyramid having sanctified G-d's name and paid the ultimate sacrifice with their own hands.

Adapting for our Jewish 2020 the words of anthropologist M. Eliade in his 1974 book, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, traditional society retains a sensitive, vibrant feeling about the past—that is, we Jews feel the continuity which links us to our past, that is, we are living in a "permanent" present. Interestingly, the High Holy Days are a time when it is custom to visit the graves of our loved ones to honor and respect the contributions they have made in our lives. Thus, we derive our identity from the cumulative experience of our former generations. We judge our Jewish present in the light of our Jewish past, and also in the light of our vision of our Jewish

community and our individual future, without ever losing our sense as to the uniqueness of the present. We see that ram in the thickets as our G-d-given opportunity for a positive future with choices that will provide for a bright outlook. While we relish our past and spend many hours grappling with it and the lessons we can take from it, we are a People who always see a bright future ahead. As a result, we understand our place in the universe and in history as part of what philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy called "the great chain of being."

Haberman writes that Akedat Yitzchak has made so profound an impression on the consciousness of the Jewish people in generation after generation it is no wonder that we keep coming back to this story each and every year to make our own association with Abraham and with all of the Abrahams through the centuries and millennia until us today.

We say after hearing the call of the shofar, "On this day, all the world's creatures stand before you in judgment, some as children ... If you look upon us as children, then pity us as a parent pities their children."

An eyewitness account from New York City, on a cold day in December, some years ago: A little boy, about ten years old, was standing before a shoe store, barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold.

A lady approached the young boy and said, "My, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!"

"I was asking G-d to give me a pair of shoes," was the boy's reply.

The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her.

She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel. By this time, the clerk had returned with the socks and shoes. She placed a pair of socks upon the boy's feet, and then she purchased for him a pair of shoes.

She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, "No doubt, you will be more comfortable now."

As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her. "Are you G-d's wife?"

Perhaps he should have asked her if she was G-d?

The third Aliyah today ended, "Vayikra Avraham Shem HaMakom hahu Adonai Yireh asher yeamer hayom b'har Adonai year-eh"—And Abraham named the site where this event took place, Adonai Yireh—whence the present saying, “on the mount of the Lord there is vision.”

With that, one of the wonders of Zoom is that we can divide you up into breakout rooms to have smaller group discussions.

I want to ask you to discuss in your groups several questions based on these analyses of the Akedat Yitzchak and share your interpretation of G-d's vision.

- How much do our High Holy Days involve sacrifice for you?
- How much do our High Holy Days open your eyes to perceiving new or different things, about yourself, about the world around you, about G-d?
- Do the High Holy Days offer you, on the one hand, a vision of giving up nearly all that is precious to you, while on the other hand, making you a promise of a significant future? In other words, are the holidays game-changers for you or others, which you do not perceive in other holidays or under other circumstances?

We will ask you to discuss these questions in your group for about twenty minutes and then, when we come back together, we will hear from the breakout room facilitators what was discussed. Remember, everyone is entitled to their own feelings. Regardless of how passionately you might feel, though, please do not monopolize the discussion. Let's let everyone share. We can't share hugs so much this year, but we can share our feelings.

Notes from your group discussion (naturally, it's fine for these to be mental notes and not written notes):

Today rabah, thank you, to everyone who participated in the breakout room discussions.

Special thanks to our breakout room facilitators: Bob Bender, Andrew Levine, Sandra Kassin-Deardorff, and Doug Wiggins.

My prayer for everyone is that we look at sacrifice and the work of our hands as a means to enhance the world, to build up each other and all humanity, as we make G-d's vision a reality.