

Rosh HaShanah Day 2 5783

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Abraham assembled his caravan. He had a meeting with G-d planned. On the third day, he took his son, Yitzchak, his cherished son, by the hand and headed up Mount Moriah. I'm sure that there was chit-chat. I think about my son Sam, especially when he was adolescent and how he would bipipipipi. He's almost twenty-six now and still goes on and on. He came home from Seattle last month, and I said to my wife, Karen, "I think I'll ask Sam if he wants to go out for a walk and talk my ear off!"

There is much debate about the context of the story of the Akeidah, or Binding of Yitzchak, and its impact on us. Dr. Sik-ping Choi, associate professor at the Bible Seminary of Hong Kong, gave a lecture in 2017 in which he compared the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic takes on the Akeidah. The Jewish version, which we just read, spotlights Abraham's faith and Isaac's relative passive participation. The Islamic version, Dr. Choi suggests, is based on obedience displayed by Abraham and actually is unclear about who is being potentially sacrificed. The Koran indicates that Ishmael, the eldest son of a slave, Hagar, is the one to be sacrificed. Further, he consented to the sacrifice as he wanted to be closer to G-d.

The Christian perspective, he says, demonstrates both Abraham's faith and obedience. In the Christian Book of James 2:21–24, it is written: "Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works." Beyond Abraham's faith and obedience, Christianity then focuses on the characteristics such as a miraculous birth and the fact that Isaac was the only son in the family, seemingly ignoring Ishmael. Additionally, Dr. Choi suggests, the idea that a life could be sacrificed for the sake of others is a possible parallel referring to the sacrifice of Jesus.

I wonder what Ishmael was doing; what was his part in this story?

Other views on this Akeidah story believe that Sarah died when she found out what had happened. Who told her? What was the discussion she had with Avraham? They were never together again in the Torah.

Rabbi Tavi Hersh Weinreb of the Orthodox Union wrote in an article in the *Jewish Star* a couple of years ago, “From the start of Genesis, we have been reading one long story extending over many centuries. It began with the creation of man and proceeded with the narrative of the transformation of a small family into a large nation.” That large nation continues with us today.

Former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary Arnie Eisen wrote of another central Jewish story, Passover:

Think about it: you open the [Haggadah] at the start of the seder, expecting to find page after page that fulfills the biblical commandment to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt; you read near the very start of the Haggadah that whoever enlarges upon that story in the course of the evening is to be praised—and then you find a presentation of the Israelites’ move from slavery to freedom that is disjointed, short on detail, and occasionally hard to follow. Moses, who we might have thought would play a major role in the tale, is not mentioned even once. Pharaoh’s name comes up only four times ... The third major character in the drama—God—is absolutely everywhere in the Haggadah. That seems to be the point the authors of the text over the centuries had in mind.

Chancellor Eisen and I propose we look at all the stories of the Torah, consider the lessons to learn, and then ask ourselves two more questions:

- How do *we* think the story should be told?
- What *lessons* do they bear for you and me, right here, right now?

He asks that we focus not just on “I,” but also, “we.” *We* means one thing if it “includes only those gathered around the table ... or even the Jewish people as a whole. Suppose our “we” also includes the neighbors we don’t

really know, the people down the street or a few miles away, fellow residents of the continent we inhabit, or fellow inhabitants (and stewards) of the planet.”

Whether we are reflecting on the impact to our lives of the Akeidah story of Rosh HaShanah, or the trip to the Promised Land at Passover, or the founding of Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, or what we will take away from our High Holy Days services here at Temple Emanu-El, we all have a Torah story to tell. How will we tell our Torah story? What will it say of us? How is Torah imbuing our lives with values? Does Torah come up in your daily lives?

A friend of mine, a rabbi, recently took his family on a trip to Israel. He wrote about one story of his trip in his recent Shabbat note to his congregation. He shared,

When you visit Israel, every moment is an encounter and every interaction is a life story. Yesterday, I was talking to my cab driver as we were driving back from Geula. He was telling how he grew up with a Muslim dad and Jewish mother who both claimed him as part of their religion which left him so confused. He ended up marrying a girl whose parents were also Jewish and Muslim. Although he believed in G-d, he didn't practice religion.

As we were nearing the stop, the married father of two looks at me in the mirror and says I have a surprise for you, tomorrow will be the 37th Shabbat I am observing on my way to returning to Judaism. I asked him what did it? Was it his wife who also had a Jewish mother and Muslim father? His two children aged 8 and 4? He looked at me and said I don't know, it was a soul connection!

The reference in the rabbi's story to looking in the mirror reminded me of one of my favorite musical storytellers, Harry Chapin, who sings in his song "Taxi,"

It took a while, but she looked in the mirror  
And she glanced at the license for my name  
A smile seemed to come to her slowly  
It was a sad smile, just the same  
And she said, "How are you, Harry?"  
I said, "How are you, Sue?"  
Through the too many miles and the too little smiles  
I still remember you. ..."  
It was somewhere in a fairy tale...

And it goes on from there, a story of the lives of two people.

Rabbi Weinreb asks, "Why does a book [that is the Torah] designed to teach the reader about proper religious belief and practice take the form of a narrative?"

He says the reason is quite simple. The Torah recognizes the power of the story to influence the minds and hearts of men. He says that he remembers the stories his teachers told him better than the academic lessons they taught him.

According to Jewish tradition, the white spaces between the black letters and the space in the margins are equally important. It is within them that we see ourselves and most discover life's mysteries. We find our narratives and our Torah story in those spaces.

We take the letters, lessons, and guidance we find in the Torah stories to craft our own. I say that we should look at our *B'Rosh HaShanah yi-ka-tei-vun* and not count in the next year how many will live and die, who by fire and who by water, but rather, who will find the cure for disease, who will inspire a young person to go back and finish school, who will develop the

policies that address homelessness. Who will find the right therapy to address drug addiction. Who will bring warring peoples together at the peace table? Which one of us will inspire all of us to look into the eyes of our neighbor and see promise not problems? Who will connect souls and see the “we,” not “them”?

Rabbi Weinreb of the Orthodox Union wrote, “I long ago became familiar with an approach to ... personal narrative as the basis for curative change. My favorite mentor would emphasize that when a therapist first encounters a patient, his opening question should not be, ‘What’s your problem,’ but rather, ‘Please tell me your story.’”

At this Rosh HaShanah, when we hear the call of the shofar and when contemplate G-d’s calling out, “Avraham ... Avraham,” might G-d actually be calling to each one of us, “Sadie, Josh, Rachel, Ben, Phil, ALL OF US!” When we assemble our caravan and saddle up our camel, where will we be going and what will our story of Torah be?

Shanah tovah.