Rabbi Moshe Waldoks

Rosh Ha-Shanah 5775

Why is the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah Genesis 21, The Lord took note of Sarah?

On the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, millions of Jews gather in synagogue, and hear the story of how God fulfilled a promise that Sarah would have a child (Isaac), how Sarah persuaded Abraham to exclude Hagar and her son (Ishmael), and how Abraham negotiated with Abimelech over water rights. On the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah we hear Genesis 22, the following chapter, in which God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, whom He then spares.

Why was Genesis 21, The Lord took note of Sarah chosen as the reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah? One standard answer is that Rosh Ha-Shanah celebrates the creation of the world, so we read of the creation of the Jewish people. If this was the reason for the selection, a more appropriate Torah reading would be the Creation story in Genesis chapter 1 or 2, or the story of the renewal of the world after the Flood in Genesis chapter 8 or 9.

Larry Margarick in a fascinating article in the Jewish Quarterly Review tells us that:

Rosh Ha-Shanah originally had one day, not two. If the binding of Isaac and the sacrificialram were the connection, Genesis 22 would have been selected for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, not the second day. In short, none of these answers is persuasive. Usually, the choice of a Torah reading is fairly clear, but here we are left with a puzzle.

According to Leviticus 23:23-25, the first day of the seventh month is a rest day, commemorated by the sounding of blasts. Biblically, the first day of the seventh month is certainly not the "New Year," nor is it a major festival. The Biblical "New Year" was the first day of the spring month later called Nisan, as stated in Exodus 12:2: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.

By the era of the Mishnah (around 200 C.E.), the first day of the seventh month was described as Rosh Ha-Shanah, and a tractate of the Mishnah begins by explaining how this day is considered the most important "New Year."

Eventually, Rosh Ha-Shanah was considered to be the day of either the creation of the world or the creation of humanity, a day of judgment, the onset of a period of repentance, the coronation of God as King, and the beginning of the Yamim Nora’im ("Days of Awe" or "High Holidays"). The Mishnah prescribes Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah. The choice of this short pericope in the Mishnah would appear to have been
made before the marked increase in the meaning and importance of Rosh Ha-Shanah. The Tosefta states that on Rosh Ha-Shanah the Torah reading is Leviticus 23:23-25,

The Mishnah does not give a reason for its designation of Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah, although the reason seems obvious since that pericope describes the holiday. The Tosefta does not give a reason for either the original assignment of Leviticus 23:23-25 or the "alternate" assignment of Genesis 21. Neither the Mishnah nor the Tosefta prescribes a Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, which appears to demonstrate that a second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah was not yet observed. The Mishnah prescribes Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah. The choice of this short pericope in the Mishnah would appear to have been made before the marked increase in the meaning and importance of Rosh Ha-Shanah. The Tosefta states that on Rosh Ha-Shanah the Torah reading is Leviticus 23:23-25, but adds that there are others who maintain that the reading is Genesis 21, The Lord took note of Sarah. Assuming that the Tosefta is later than the Mishnah, a variation in the assigned reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah appears to have arisen sometime after 200 C.E.

While Rosh Ha-Shanah commemorates God as Creator and King of all people, the Torah reading emphasizes the special relationship between God and the Jewish people. For Christians, Genesis 22, the sacrifice and survival of Isaac, foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; Genesis 22 was therefore adopted in the early Church for Easter vigil (Holy Saturday).

Once Rosh Ha-Shanah was observed for two days by Jews, Genesis 22 was apparently selected as the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah simply because it follows the already-selected Genesis 21 for the first day of the festival. Nevertheless, for Jews, the dramatic narrative of Genesis 22 also stresses the unique relationship of God with the Jewish people.

The destruction of the Second Temple led to a transvaluation of Rosh Ha-Shanah from a relatively minor festival, associated with the biblical and sacrificial regime, to a major holiday, concerned with personal responsibility, repentance and judgment. These changes seem to have occurred in dialogue with Christianity. The "conversation" over the choice of a Scriptural reading appears to have been polemical. Through the Scriptural selection for public reading on this holiday, Jews highlighted their special relationship with God during a day which otherwise emphasizes God as Creator and King of all people.

If the binding of Isaac and the sacrificial ram were the connection, Genesis 22 would have been selected for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, not the second day. In short, none of these answers is persuasive. Usually, the choice of a Torah reading is fairly clear, but here we are left with a puzzle.
Another possibility is that the real reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah was the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22. This is currently the prescribed reading for the second day, and its inclusion of a ram caught in the thicket might allude to the shofar, the sounding of which is a central feature of Rosh Ha-Shanah. The preceding chapter, Genesis 21, was perhaps added only as a preface.

However, this explanation cannot be accepted. Rosh Ha-Shanah originally had one day, not two.

Margarik brings a clue from the well known liturgical scholar, Eric Werner, who compares the lectionaries (prescribed Scriptural readings) for the early Synagogue and the early Church. It appears that Christians were not sure of the date when Jesus was born (because no date is given in the Gospels), an there were several possible dates in circulation within the early churches until the fourth century C.E., when December 25 was fixed as the date for Christmas.

The ordained Scriptural reading for the day(s) which early Christians associated with the birth of Jesus was Genesis 21.

[Even more intriguing, I Samuel chapter 1, which describes the birth of Samuel to Hannah, was also prescribed in the early Church for this day. I Samuel chapter 1 is the haftarah (synagogue reading from the Prophets) on the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. It parallels the Torah reading of Genesis 21, The Lord took note of Sarah, because both readings describe the miraculous birth of a son to a childless woman. Finally, the haftarah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah is from Jeremiah 31. Werner's comparisons show that a passage from Jeremiah (although it is Jeremiah 32, the chapter following the one prescribed by the Synagogue as the haftarah for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah) was also assigned in the early Church to a putative date for the birth of Jesus.]

In short, Werner concludes, Rosh Ha-Shanah and Christmas are parallel holidays in the early development of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

What explanation can be given for such a correspondence between Synagogue and Church as far as these Scriptural readings are concerned?

One possibility is that the Jewish lectionary came first. This is the more traditional approach. According to this interpretation, Jews understood Rosh Ha-Shanah to be not only a New Year, but also the time of (re)birth, creation, and of barrenness becoming fertility. The choice of Genesis 21 seems appropriate, as it speaks of the end of Sarah's barrenness and the birth of the successor to Abraham. The early Church adapted this understanding to the putative birth date of Jesus. This would then be an example of Christian "borrowing" from Jewish practice.
Although this adaptation seems logical, it still does not account for the fact that the Mishnah originally recorded Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah. Nor does it explain why Genesis 21 was specifically chosen for Rosh Ha-Shanah. As noted above, if Jews understood the first day of the seventh month to be a general "birthday," they could have selected other appropriate Torah readings, such as the creation of Adam and Eve, the birth of their children, the births of children to Jacob and his wives, the birth of Moses or, indeed, the Creation of the world.

Christians picked Genesis 21, The Lord took note of Sarah, because they saw it as foreshadowing the birth of Jesus, the miraculous fulfillment of the promised birth to a woman who should not naturally have borne a child. The word pakad ("took note of") may be translated as "visited" rather than simply "remembered." This "visitation" could also be used to suggest a Divine parenting for Isaac. As with many biblical births, there is no reference in Genesis 21 to Abraham and Sarah having intercourse. However, the context and word flow can be interpreted here to suggest that God had some direct interchange with Sarah: first God visits her, and then she becomes pregnant. In fact, there is a puzzling doublet in the very first line of Genesis 21: The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken (Gen. 21:1).

What is the difference between the first half of the verse and the second half? Christian reinterpretation might explain that God actually impregnated Sarah, foreshadowing the visitation of Mary by the Holy Ghost. While Abraham's age itself would (from a modern understanding of biology) prove no barrier to Sarah's conception, Christians detected a suggestion that God rather than Abraham was Isaac's father.

If these were the reasons for the Christian choice of Genesis 21 as a Scriptural reading for the putative date of Jesus' birth, rabbinic Judaism may have adopted the same reading as an anti-Christian polemic.

Jews understood the import of Genesis 21 in exactly the opposite way to the Christian view. Genesis 21 may be considered a turning point, because Isaac is the first Jewish child born to Jewish parents. Paul, the founder of a "gentile" or "universal" Christianity, argued that Abraham was righteous because of his faith alone and not because he was ethnically a Jew.

Christians argued that since Abraham was chosen by God before he was circumcised, this shows that circumcision is unnecessary. Furthermore, Abraham was chosen before the Torah was given, proving that "the Law" is unnecessary.

In the Jewish understanding, Genesis 21 rebuts this argument. Isaac, ethnically a Jew is circumcised without delay. God, affirming Sarah, rules that Abraham's gentile child, Ishmael, must be excluded from the succession, because there will be no descent through that child: The son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac . . . do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you (Gen. 21:10, 12).
Prescribing Genesis 21 as the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah would thus be a Jewish response to Christian selection of the same passage, based on a diametrically opposed polemical reading of the same text. In the Jewish reading, the spiritual descent through Isaac is ethnic. This would also explain why prior births in Genesis would not be appropriate for the Torah reading on Rosh Ha-Shanah, even if Rosh Ha-Shanah was understood to be the holiday of birth: all the prior births in Genesis were of gentiles.

For Christians, Genesis 22, the sacrifice and survival of Isaac, foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; Genesis 22 was therefore adopted in the early Church for Easter vigil (Holy Saturday), not Christmas.

The destruction of the Second Temple led to a transvaluation of Rosh Ha-Shanah from a relatively minor festival, associated with the biblical and sacrificial regime, to a major holiday, concerned with personal responsibility, repentance and judgment. These changes seem to have occurred in dialogue with Christianity. The "conversation" over the choice of a Scriptural reading appears to have been polemical. Through the Scriptural selection for public reading on this holiday, Jews highlighted their special relationship with God during a day which otherwise emphasizes God as Creator and King of all people.