

Drop the Knife!

Rosh Hashanah, Day 2

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One of the most moving books I read this past year was the memoir *Educated*, by Tara Westover. The author takes the reader on a startling, almost incomprehensible journey into her past. She was born on a remote mountain in Idaho, the seventh child of fundamentalist, survivalist Mormon parents. Westover's father is obsessed with the idea that the government will invade at any moment, and believes that the apocalypse is right around the corner. Nothing and no one could be trusted...not modern medicine, not modern schools, and for that matter, not very much of the world outside their mountain fortification. Westover's mother is an herbalist and midwife, and her father owns a junkyard where he makes his kids work without protective gear on some seriously dangerous machinery. As one book review said, "it's a wonder she lived to tell her tale at all." In a harrowing journey of self-awareness and independence, Westover teaches herself enough math to get admitted to Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City. No small rebellion against her family's unenlightened ways. And then she went to London, eventually completing a PhD at Cambridge. It is the most unlikely journey from Clifton, Idaho, population 337.

As her mind is awakened to so many things that she had never had any exposure to all: music, film, literature, art, culture, philosophy...she makes a remarkably profound statement. Westover says: "My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs."

Today, these holidays, are so much about reflection, introspection, and memory. *Ein shichecha lifnei kisei chevodecha*, we say in the Mahzor, "there is no forgetting before God's holy throne." But it's not just remembering for the sake of nostalgia or sentimentality. It is remembrance for the purpose of forgiveness, and ultimately personal change and transformation.

And there is an incredible example of this right there in our Torah reading this morning! I have to make a confession to you. This is a confessional season, so hopefully it's appropriate. This is my 19th Rosh Hashanah as a rabbi. My 19th year trying to explain, comment on, dissect, illuminate, elucidate the story of *Akeidat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, that is the Torah reading this morning. And I've been studying that text for even longer. For 19 years, 10 of them right here at Har Shalom, I have said all kinds of things about Abraham passing the test or failing the test. I have raised questions about why God would even ask Abraham to do such a thing. I have compared Abraham's utter silence in this story to his courageous repudiation of God's plan to destroy the cities of S'dom and Amorrhah, wondering aloud why Abraham didn't speak up for the life of his own son. I have wondered about Sarah's role in this whole drama, and if the trauma of finding out what Abraham set out to do with their one and only son contributed to her suspicious death in the very next chapter of the Torah. But my confession is that while these explanations are all somewhat satisfying, none of them fully satisfied my visceral discomfort and perplexity with this text. I want to give a major shout out to two people probably never before mentioned in the same sentence: the author Tara Westover and the Kotzker Rebbe, both of who have turned me on to an extraordinary reading of Genesis 22.¹

¹ I am grateful to Rabbi Ari Hart for introducing me to the Kotzker's commentary on this episode

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was born in Poland in 1787. He was attracted to Hassidut, and early in his life was recognized for his knowledge of Talmud and Kabbalah. Known as the Kotzker Rebbe, he didn't write down any of his own teachings, but many were preserved and posthumously published by his beloved son-in-law and disciple. The Kotzker Rebbe refers to a Midrash that makes a radical claim:

“Lo amarti lecha shachatuhu, eileh ha'aleihu,” The Midrash claims that God never told Abraham to sacrifice his son! I didn't say *shachatuhu* in the Torah, I didn't tell you to shecht him, to slaughter him. What I said was *ha'aleihu* sham, what I said was bring up your son, raise up your son. *Ha'aleihu*, it sounds like aliyah...raise him up, don't kill him! You Abraham thought that when I said *ha'aleihu* that I meant to slaughter him as an offering, as an *olah*, but I didn't! Abraham, you got it all wrong! But then listen to what the Kotzker Rebbe says:

Shelo lishchato, haya etzlo avodah gedolah beyoter mei'avodat ha'shechitah, the greatest thing that Abraham did, the most remarkable, the most powerful, the most spectacular act of faith in this story is not that Abraham bound Isaac to the altar, but that he took him off of it. What does he mean by that? The Kotzker means that Abraham was able to radically change his mind and his plans. Look, in the first aliyah the Torah says that Abraham got up early that morning, *vayashkem baboker*, and he started saddling the donkeys, and getting the servants ready, and chopping the wood for the burnt offering. He was ready; he was prepared; he was utterly convinced that this was what he was supposed to do, what he had to do. And then he wakes up Isaac and schleps him three days into the wilderness, and he takes his knife and his firestone, he builds an altar, lies Isaac on the wood, and is about to go through with it! I am wrapped up in the suspense every time I read this story. And then, at the very last second, we hear the words we've been waiting for: *Avraham, Avraham, al tishlach yad'cha el-ha'na-ar*, don't touch him!² But you know, people who are transfixed, who are poised to execute a plan (pun intended) aren't easily walked back from that plan. When you've been committed to something, convinced of something, your mind's made up...changing course can be very difficult, if not impossible. The greatness of Abraham is that he dropped the knife. That he was able to acknowledge that what he thought was the right thing to do, actually was not. What he thought was God's will, was actually not God's will. What he had been planning and preparing for so meticulously, he had actually wildly misunderstood. The glory, the great act of faith in this story, again is not the Abraham was willing to put his son on the altar but that he was willing to take him off of the altar. And that, I believe is the ultimate lesson and the reason why we read this particular episode out of the entire Torah, this episode on this day.

So many of us struggle with changing directions in our lives. We become so convinced of our own righteousness, our own interpretations of events and people that we become rigid and unwilling to consider any other possibility or perspective. Some of this goes all the way back to our childhood, where assumptions about all kinds of things are so ingrained. Sometimes we grow so set in our ways, so habitualized to respond to certain situations in the same ways that it becomes almost impossible to break free. Our spouses, our kids, our loved ones may point these things out to us, ask us to change, encourage us to react differently, but we are so hard-wired about certain behaviors aren't we? The prospect of change is so uncomfortable, so unimaginable.

² Genesis 22:11

The great teacher and philosopher Rabbi Norman Lamm wrote: “It is the nature of man, once he has taken a clear position in life to mold the future along the doctrines of the past...it is part of our normal psychology: What we have invested in time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change, we cannot change, lest we declare that our entire past has been invalid and inauthentic. Self-justification of our past dictates our future.”

Rosh Hashanah asks us to consider what parts of our past are dictating our future. What behaviors are we perpetuating because that’s always how we’ve done it, even when we know we could do it better. *T’ka be’shofar gadol le’cheiruteinu*...May the sound of the shofar this year proclaim our liberation, our freedom. The freedom to think differently, to feel differently, to act differently; the freedom to break free of what our past has dictated for us, the power that it holds over us, and like Abraham, to choose a radically different outcome. A better outcome. Bob Marley sings in his Redemption Song: “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds.”

You know the greeting Shana Tova is usually translated as “A good year,” or “Happy New Year.” But shana can mean both “year” and it can also mean “change.” In Hebrew, to change is *le’shanot*. This year, in the spirit of what the Kotzker Rebbe calls *avodah gedolah be’yoter*, the greatest act of service, the greatest avodah, the greatest work, to change course in life, like Abraham did, to drop the knife, in that spirit I wish you a *shana tova*...not just a good year, but a good change. As Tara Westover said: “The decisions I made after that moment [the moment she decided to break free of her roots] were not the ones she would have made. She being the earlier version of herself. They were the choices of a changed person, a new self...”

Avraham Avinu, dear patriarch Abraham. I am sorry for questioning you and misunderstanding you for all of these years. I am sorry I never before paid enough attention to what you did at the end of the story, and how significant and courageous that was. You, the very first monotheist, the very first person to hear the voice of God could have lowered that knife and slaughtered your child, believing that God demanded that of you. You could have ignored the angel calling out your name, tamped it down, pretend you didn’t hear it. You could have chosen to save face, to maintain your prophetic reputation. After all, you were a man on a mission. The altar was built, the wood was placed, the boy was laying there before you. But you demonstrated for all time that true faith is not only rigidly following what you believe to be true, but also being able to acknowledge when you are wrong, when you’ve misunderstood, when you need a radical change of plans. When you dropped that knife, that’s the moment when you became the great man of faith, the ancestor of the world’s great monotheistic religions. That’s when you became a true hero. As we intone your name at the beginning of every Amidah, may we draw on some aspect of that courage, to drop the knives we’re wielding, to acknowledge when we’ve gotten it wrong, and to do an about face. Because sometimes that is the most faithful, the most authentic, the most honest and important thing in our lives that we can do.