

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Rosh Hashanah Morning
September 19, 2020

Finding the Wells of Resilience

God puts Abraham up to a test and says, "Abraham." He answers, "Here I am." God tells him to take his son, his favored one – Isaac – and offer him as a burnt offering. The next morning Abraham takes two of his servants, along with Isaac and the wood for the burnt offering, and begins his journey. On the third day Abraham looks up and sees the place God has told him to go to. He tells his servants to remain; he and Isaac will worship there and then return. Abraham takes the wood and puts it on Isaac. He takes the firestone and the knife, and they walk together.

Isaac asks his father where the sheep is for the burnt offering. Abraham answers that God will see to the sheep. They walk on and arrive at their destination. Abraham builds an altar there and lays out the wood. He binds Isaac and lays him on the altar on top of the wood.

Abraham picks up the knife to slay his son. At that moment, an angel of God calls to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

Abraham sees a ram and offers it as a burnt offering in place of his son. He names the site Adonai-yireh. The angel declares that God will bestow his blessing upon Abraham because he has not withheld his son. Abraham returns to his servants, and they depart together for Beer Sheva. (Genesis 22)

What a deeply problematic and horrifying story, one that is not relegated to a minor book of the Bible, but placed prominently in the book of Genesis and read every year on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

Of all texts we could read, this one hovers before us, daring us to make sense of a God who forbids murder but who commands Abraham to sacrifice his son. Daring us to hold up Abraham as a beloved ancestor, even though he had considered committing such a deplorable act.

But aspects of the story resonate this year, as we grapple with the devastating COVID pandemic.

As anxiety and grief have seeped into our lives in unprecedented unimaginable ways, God's shattering command and Abraham's acquiescence and Isaac's passivity and Sarah's absence take on new meaning.

Years after this story, Isaac becomes blind in his old age. A midrash, or a rabbinic story, traces his blindness back to the experience of his near sacrifice.

The Rabbis imagine that the angels, who were witnessing the spectacle, began to weep as they watched Abraham bind Isaac on the altar. As Abraham raises the knife to kill his son, their tears drop from their eyes into Isaac's eyes, causing blindness in later years. (Genesis Rabbah 65:10)

Isaac survives this horrific event, but he learns that his right to existence is not absolute. He learns that both God and his father not only believe that his life is expendable, but treat his emotional well-being as collateral damage. Isaac's eyes forever remember the trauma of this day. They carry the scars from the angels' tears. He does not cry. The angels cry for him. They express what he cannot.

Just as Isaac carries with him this grief for decades to come, so too will we carry the grief from this year far into the future.

COVID has created extraordinary loss. There's the everyday kind of loss like being able to walk into a grocery store or doctor's office or hair salon without a mask. Or moving freely in an assisted living facility. Or attending a bat mitzvah or wedding. Or attending synagogue or a neighborhood barbeque.

There's the loss that comes with a collapsing economy, of losing our jobs or much of our income.

There's the loss of dwindling options, of dreams drying up, of being boxed into scenarios not of our choosing.

There's the loss that comes when the fragile balance between work and caring for children also collapses, of not being able to sustain the demands imposed upon us.

There's the loss that our children feel, attending school in their bedrooms, stuck behind screens, and unable to play with their peers.

There's the loss that comes from isolation, of not being able to visit with family or friends or coworkers, of losing our most basic social connections.

There's the loss of living alone or living with someone we don't particularly like, of not being able to get out, of being afraid to leave, of being told to stay home because we are too high risk.

There's the loss that comes from contracting the virus, of being ill, of not knowing when we will recover, if we ever will.

There's the loss that comes from fearing that we will contract the virus, or worrying that our loved ones will contract the virus. Not knowing if our flimsy masks are any match for a contagious coronavirus.

There's the loss that comes with death, with knowing that a loved one is dying alone, with not being able to be there, or to gather for a funeral.

We do not know what the future will look like, but we do know the world will be forever changed. We do not know when the pandemic will end, but we do know that it will be a long, heart-wrenching path ahead. We are anxious. We are grieving. We are overwhelmed. Life is so uncertain.

Often it feels like the world is spinning and we lack the agency to control our present or our future. I imagine that this is what Isaac felt as he lay on the altar, as his father bound him, as his father raised the knife. Isaac must have felt powerless.

It's such a disturbing story that collectively, for thousands of years, we have tried to wrap our minds around the story. We have tried to justify it, critique it and challenge it, shape it in our image and according to our sense of ethics. We wonder how God could demand such an act or why Abraham would not have objected.

Only seven verses after the whole ordeal ends, we read that Sarah dies. The Rabbis do not consider this a coincidence. They believe that she dies of grief. In one midrash Isaac returns to his mother after the ram is sacrificed in his place. She asks him where he has been, and he tells her what happened. Sarah realizes that had it not been for the angel, her beloved son would have been slain. Upon hearing Isaac's account, Sarah utters six cries, which correspond to the six blasts of the shofar. Immediately afterwards she dies. (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 20:2)

Why did Sarah die, if indeed Isaac still lived? Maybe she realized that she had lost Abraham, that he had undermined everything she loved and believed in. She realized that after everything they had been through, he transgressed the most sacred of lines. His willingness to sacrifice their son was betrayal.

When we listen to the sound of the shofar, we hear Sarah's cries, her frustration and horror of a world that makes no sense. We hear her bitterness of being trapped in an unbearable and untenable situation. The shofar blasts pierce the overwhelming silence that hangs over the story. God sets the events in motion and then disappears, leaving it to the angels to put an end to the whole experiment.

Abraham does not protest. Isaac does not protest. After it's all over, Abraham never speaks to God again. Isaac never speaks to Abraham again. The Rabbis fill in this terse text with Sarah's voice, wailing in grief.

Sometimes we need to cry out, give voice to our pain, speak out forcefully. When we are silent, our despair deepens, our powerlessness becomes entrenched. When we turn our anger inward and try to suppress it, the anger can immobilize us and make us resentful.

When we direct our anger outwards, channel it carefully and constructively, give it space to breathe, it can move us to action, can inch us towards justice. Holiness and power dwell in this anger.

A curious thing happens after Abraham sacrifices the ram in Isaac's place. Isaac seems to disappear. The text tells us that Abraham returns to his servants and to his home in Beer Sheva. While the last midrash I mentioned envisions Isaac in dialogue with his mother, we don't actually see him in the Torah until a couple chapters later. He has just come back from the vicinity of Be'er-lachai-roi, translated roughly as the well of the living one who sees.

This was the well where Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, after being cast out by Abraham the first time, had encountered an angel who tells her that God has heard her suffering.

Hagar names God El-roi, the God of seeing. Be'er-lachai-roi is the place where God sees her. After the trauma of his near-sacrifice, Isaac goes to the place where Hagar encounters God, the place where God sees those who are cast away and rejected.

Perhaps Isaac, who had lost so much, who was blinded by the angel's tears, whose father had abandoned him, whose mother had died from anger and grief – perhaps Isaac went back to the well because it was a place of resilience. He needed to go to the place of seeing, the place where his pain would be acknowledged and respected.

In a place of utter brokenness, we too can find the wells of resilience.

Like Isaac, we will carry the scars left by the angels' tears with us, grieving from a year of loss, reeling from powerlessness and fear and overwhelm.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us hear the sound of Sarah's cries in the shofar. Let us make space for our anxiety and our anguish and our anger. Let us find those wells, train ourselves to see new possibilities and new ways of being. Let us imagine and work toward a better future, a world that we actually want to live in.

L'shanah tovah – may it be a sweet and healthy new year.