

ROSH HASHANA SERMON: PARTNERS

Birth is an extraordinary moment in our lives. Each birth is like a miracle.

Each life has such potential. If you ask people what moment in their lives felt most connected to the divine, they will usually say the birth of their child.

So how do we understand this holiday of Rosh Hashanah which celebrates the birth of the world?

What do we mean when we announce before each Shofar blast:

Hayom harat olam – today is the birth of the world.

I would like you to envision with me what this moment of the world's birth might have looked like. We get a pretty good idea from the first chapter of Genesis, one of the readings for Rosh Hashana.

We learn that God created the world by uttering words.

“Let there be light,” says God. And there was light.

And so on, for six days.

But I want us to speculate about what God might have been thinking in beginning this project. Why did God create this world?

Because, by figuring this out, we can figure out what we are doing here.

For the mystics of our tradition, God had to actually contract Godself in order to make room for the world. Why would God do that?

By the end of the first chapter of Genesis, I think it becomes fairly clear.

God needs a companion, a partner in the work of Creation.

God is in need of, in search of man, to quote Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

So God creates the human being, the Adam – or earthling –

the word Adam comes from “adamah” which means “earth” in Hebrew.

While everything else that God creates, God calls “good,”

the human being God calls “very good.” Adam is created *b'tzelem* Elohim,

in God’s image, tasked by God to “fill the earth and master it...

to till the land and tend it.” Although God begins the work of creation,

God wants us to continue that work. God needs our help!

Now, in some ways, this idea is a little like the other creation stories

of the Ancient Near East. As Ed Feinstein,¹ the senior rabbi of

Valley Beth Shalom in Encino points out, the gods in those stories

create a human partner as well. However, the goal for them

is very different. These partners are there to conquer the world with the gods.

¹ This sermon is based on a teaching offered by Rabbi Feinstein in the summer of 2020.

That is not what our God, the God of Israel, has in mind for us.

God wants us to be a blessing to the world, to help perfect Creation, to bring justice and compassion into the world.

God wants us to carry out God's plan for a world of oneness, and harmony, and peace. For this we were created.

In chapter one of Genesis, God creates this beautifully fashioned world, and offers it to the human being as a gift. The rest is up to us: to implement, to fulfill God's vision. But there is a big problem.

In case you haven't noticed, human beings are flawed.

Once God places God's dreams into our hands, we mess up.

God's first attempt at finding a partner, Adam with his wife Eve, proves to be a big disappointment. Here the human beings are, in this lovely garden, with no worries of any kind, everything is taken care of for them, but that is not enough. They resist being told what to do.

They have a mind of their own. God tells them that they can have anything they want in this vast, luxurious place, absolutely anything, except for the fruit of this one tree.

So, of course, that is the precise fruit that they want, and the result is that they fall.

God's first effort to find a worthy partner has failed.

So God decides to start over, to destroy the world and its inhabitants,

except for one person and his family, as well as some animals.

Noah is described as "tam," perfect, and God hopes that this seemingly

righteous person will be up to the job.

Unfortunately, as soon as the flood is over, the first thing Noah does

is to plant a vineyard and get drunk, ending up having some sort of

unfortunate sexual encounter with his sons.

He doesn't seem to be able to handle the responsibility that has been placed

on him. He is a little like the prophet Jonah who tries to escape God's call

by running away and hiding in the bowels of a ship.

Second strike for God.

God's third choice is Abraham, and the third time's the charm.

God says to Abraham: "You shall be a blessing."

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh understands this as a command:

To merit the promise of reward, you must live so as to be a blessing to the world.² Abraham is also righteous. Yes, he is flawed – remember he lies about his wife Sarah being his sister when they flee to Egypt during a famine. He also obeys Sarah and banishes his son, Ishmael, and Ishmael’s mother, leaving them in the desert to possibly die. But Abraham shines when it comes to demanding justice. He proves ready to confront God, to speak truth to power when God intends to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham is outraged: How can God punish a whole city if there are innocent people within it? And God relents. God allows a human being to call God to a higher ethical path, to remind God of what real justice in the world is all about. Rabbi David Hartman explains that it is only with Abraham that God is willing to give up some of God’s power in order to truly “share responsibility for history with human beings.”³ This is the covenantal relationship that God establishes with Abraham.

² Etz Hayim, p. 70.

³ A Heart of Many Rooms, p. 30.

Both God and Abraham – and thus we as Jews -- are empowered to uphold morality.

Now the Torah reading for tomorrow morning , the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, seems to present Abraham in a contradictory light.

Here, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, and Abraham is prepared to obey without question.

Isn't God's request the epitome of injustice, the opposite of ethics? Why doesn't Abraham speak up here?

Isn't it appalling that Abraham is such a fanatic that he is ready to slaughter his son to demonstrate his faith in God?

And what kind of God is this? Is this the God we want to worship, is this the God with whom we want to partner?

It's a complicated story with hundreds of interpretations.

I frankly don't think we are meant to take it literally.

One possibility is that we might see this story as about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice, not his son, but his self-interest, his ego.

This is a story about Abraham's willingness to follow God's righteous path for no personal reward, for no personal agenda. Because, after all, sometimes we are unwilling to stand up for what is right because we might lose something of value – maybe our job? Or a friendship?

Rabbi Feinstein introduces another very powerful interpretation ⁴.

It goes like this: Picture the scene in the Torah. Abraham, his arm raised, the knife lifted above Isaac, as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into his son's chest. God sends an angel to stop him. The angel has to repeat Abraham's name twice, as Abraham is so intent on following through with this command, he cannot hear him the first time. This is where the midrash – the interpretation -- picks up:

When God sent the angel to restrain Abraham, it's not that Abraham did not hear the angel, it's that he refused to listen. Why?

Abraham tells the angel: "God Himself ordered me to sacrifice my son, it is up to Him to rescind the order."

And so God himself comes to retract the commandment.

⁴ Midrash Tanhuma

But Abraham wants to continue. With the knife at the throat of his son, he begins to argue with God: “I swear I shall not leave the altar, Lord, before I speak my mind.”

--Speak, says God.

--“Did You not promise me that my descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky?” asks Abraham.

--“Yes, I did promise you that,” God responds.

--“And whose descendants will they be? Mine? Mine alone?” Abraham asks.

--“No,” says God, “they will be Isaac's as well.”

--“And didn't You also promise me that they would inherit the earth?”

--“Yes, I promised you that too.”

--“Well then, my Lord,” says Abraham, “I could have pointed out to You before that Your order contradicted Your promise. I could have spoken up, I didn't. I contained my grief and held my tongue. In return, I want You to make me the following promise: that when, in the future, my children and my children's children throughout the generations will act against Your law and against Your will, You will also say nothing and forgive them.”

--“So be it,” God agrees. “Let them but retell this tale, and they will be forgiven.”

Wow! Abraham has a lot of chutzpah! In this version, Abraham tells God that God broke God's promise to Abraham. Having promised him descendants through Isaac, God's command to kill Isaac means that promise cannot be fulfilled. By holding his tongue and obeying God, Abraham extracts a vow from God. In return for his obedience, Abraham demands that God forgive God's children when they mess up in the future, because God messed up first. And God agrees! And that is the basis for forgiveness on these High Holy Days.

As Jews, we are meant to speak truth to power. We are meant to stand up for what is right, even if it means standing up to God. Because, after all, a partner is not an unthinking servant. We are in a covenant with God which the theologian Walter Brueggeman compares to a dance – sometimes God leads, sometimes we do. It was for this that we were created.