

Rosh Hashana II - 5780
"All Abraham's Children"
September 30, 2019

Abraham tossed and turned on his mat, his blanket covered with sweat. Sleep would not come. He couldn't breathe, he ached all over. Pain was now his constant companion. He wondered why he was still living. He knew that death would come soon, but not soon enough.

Despite all of his pains, his nervous sweat was caused by something else. Guilt. He felt tremendous guilt, even as death hovered over him. You would think that a patriarch like Abraham would not be plagued like this. After all, he was the first in history to answer the call of the One God. But it wasn't God who gnawed at him this night.

No, it was knowing he had failed as a father. Whose fault it is was, didn't matter. Sarah had made him throw out his first-born, Ishmael, along with his mother Hagar. He put a knife to the neck of his second son, Isaac, at God's direct command. And when she had heard about what he had done to her only son, Sarah had collapsed and died on the spot, at least according to the rabbis.

At least Sarah had been old. But his sons? It made him ache from the inside out.

If talking counts for anything, the Torah shows that Abraham and his sons had never been close. Abraham and Ishmael never exchange one word before he is banished. He only ever says eight words (eight words!) to Isaac, and that was to put him at ease so he could offer him to God!

And if Abraham is unhappy about his sons, we're not thrilled with him, either. The Midrash teaches that even Abraham knows that he is not a great father. Rabbi Ben Tema declares, "...More than all the misfortunes which overtook Abraham, this matter (exiling Ishmael) was exceedingly evil in his eyes, as it is said, 'And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son.'" (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, 30.2)

And we can only nod in agreement. These stories break our minds and shatter our hearts. They demand we search for a reason that makes sense, especially the Binding of Isaac. What could it be?

Was the Binding of Isaac story an attack on child sacrifice? My dear teacher, Rabbi Chanan Brichto, z'l, utterly rejected this. No, he argued that as our first spiritual hero, Abraham was asked to offer up to God, his ultimate value, what he valued most in his life. That was his son, Isaac. And God, in the end, would reject the offer.

But we, Brichto claimed, offer our children to gods far less worthy. And we don't even have to be commanded. We offer our children willingly to the gods of sports, academics, entertainment and more!

Take Kate. She was a bright girl. She never missed school, not even for a cold. She never got below an "A" in any subject. If she was weak in math, she worked that much harder not just to learn, but to excel. Her parents were delighted to find that Kate was so highly motivated. They encouraged her to go on to whatever heights she could achieve.

They lined up tutors for her. By 10th grade they thought that Kate was a lock for a scholarship somewhere. They sent her to a summer program at Yale to prepare her for the kind of academic atmosphere she would face in college.

But when she came back, Kate was angry and depressed. "What happened," her Mom asked. "Why are you acting like this? We sent you to Yale to help you, not to hurt you. Were the other kids there mean?"

Kate shook her head. "No. They were nice. I just don't want to do this any more." Dreams of a scholarship evaporated in her mother's head. "But you've come so far, Kate! You are such a great student. Everyone in your school looks up to you! That's why we've pushed you so hard. If you didn't want this, you just could have told us."

"No, I couldn't," Kate said angrily. "You would have looked at me with pity and told me that it was okay, when all the time I would see in your eyes how I disappointed you. And that would have been intolerable. So, I kept pushing myself, the way I knew you wanted me to."

Her father interrupted. "Kate, all we've ever wanted is for you to be happy." And Kate glared at him. "No, you would never have been satisfied with my happiness. You always said you wanted the best for me – the best for their best little girl, you always said. I knew better than to push back against that!"

And Kate's parents stood there, crestfallen. They realized that, Kate was right. They had kept setting the bar higher and higher and expecting Katie to jump over without complaint. It dawned on them that they had been willing to sacrifice their daughter to the god of their own ambitions. But thankfully, Kate had jumped off the altar before the sacrifice could be completed.

Many of us are a bit crazed when it comes to our children. We want the best for them, but that "best" can be a treacherous and false god. What are we willing to do to serve the god of "The Best?" Lie? Cheat? Steal?

The news this past year is filled with parents who would break almost any rule, pay almost any price, to get their teen into a prestigious university. Is this

unholy drive really about the welfare of our teens? Or is it the idolatry of the parents, their devotion to the damned goddess of success and keeping up with the neighbors?

It is bad enough we offer up our own children to our own false gods. But this past year and half we have watched what our government has done to other people's children at our borders and it shatters my heart. You and I have seen the pictures. We cannot get them out of our minds. Listen to their voices:

A 5-year-old boy says: "I was apprehended with my father. The immigration agents separated me from my father right away. I was very frightened and scared. I cried. I have not seen my father again... I have had a cold and cough for several days. I have not seen a doctor and I have not been given any medicine."

An 11-year-old boy says: "There are little kids here who have no one to take care of them, not even a big brother or sister. Some kids are only two or three years old and they have no one to take care of them."

A 12-year-old girl says: "At 3 a.m. the next day the officers told us that our grandmother would be taken away. My grandmother tried to show the officers a paper signed by my parents saying that my grandmother had been entrusted to take care of us. The officers rejected the paperwork saying that it had to be signed by a judge. Then the officers took my dear grandmother away. We have not seen her since that moment."

According to Newsweek, "Justice Department lawyer Sarah Fabian tried to argue...that it was not technically a requirement for the government to provide migrant children with sanitary items like soap and toothbrushes or even access to showers and blankets..."

Most of these families are running away from murder, rape and violence. And when they get here we tear children from parents and put them in detention facilities. We put children in court proceedings, children as young as 3 years old as if they are hardened criminals. We house them without adequate hygiene facilities, space to sleep or room to move about safely.

Contrary to the rhetoric we hear nationally, these families are seeking asylum here. They are not seeking to replace white people. They are coming because their choice at home is to join gangs, pay protection money or be murdered wholesale.

Where is our heart? Have we lost our *rachmones*, our compassion? Have we lost our collective memory? We fled to this country in the face of murder, rape and violence, in the form of pogroms. And we were grateful to gain admission here in the hope that we might make a better life.

So many of us did just that. Our great-grandparents didn't know English. They spoke Yiddish, Polish, Russian and Lithuanian. They were not wealthy Jews who could buy their way into this country through special visa programs. They were not those countries' "finest," the cream of the crop.

They were desperately poor and worked the most menial jobs to get a foothold to feed their families. They sewed until their fingers bled. They rolled cigars. They worked in factories. They sold buttons from pushcarts. They didn't ask for comfort or ease. All they wanted was safety and a path forward. This was what we once called the American Way, the American Dream. It is what the families at our borders want as well. A chance, nothing more

The children being held in detention centers at our borders are being sacrificed to the god of fear; fear of brown people, fear of political shifts, fear of economic competition, fear borne of prejudice, and yes, racism.

Our Torah is crystal clear on this. Thirty six times it declares: You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Thirty-six times! We're told not to eat bacon only twice.

I am not saying we need to open our borders to everyone who seeks admission. We have the right as a country to establish policies and procedures for legal entry. Sadly, the legal path to immigrate here can now take well more than a decade.

We must remember that we are part of an international community that recognizes the right of people to flee for their lives. This right is protected under the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees which the United States signed in 1967. To quote my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Mark Washofsky:

That Convention guarantees a number of rights to refugees; among these are the right not to be punished illegal entry into...a contracting state (Article 31), the right not to be expelled except under certain, strictly defined conditions)...the right to housing (Article 21), education (Article 22) and public relief..." (Article 23).

From "Thinking Halakhically About Immigration And Refugees" (2019)

Some here today might be thinking, "Rabbi, there are so many problems we face as Jews. Violent anti-Semitism, dwindling membership in congregations, the threat to Israel from Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah. You're talking about people who don't look like us, who don't speak like us, who practice a different religion. Why are you bringing this unpleasantness into our High Holy Day services?"

And I would answer that you are right – every one of these problems is worthy of our time and attention this Rosh Hashana. But I cannot stop up my ears

to the cries of those children. I cannot close my eyes to their anguished faces. I cannot stand by as these children are offered to the gods of intolerance, bigotry and fear.

I truly believe that America is the greatest home we Jews have ever had outside of our own land. I grew up singing “America the Beautiful” and crying when we got to the words, “thine alabaster cities gleam/undimmed by human tears” (except my own). I love this country because of the promise it has held for our people and so many others. And I refuse to sacrifice other people’s children who are as desperate as my own family was when we arrived on these shores in the early 1900’s.

I believe with all of my heart that we can work on our own issues as Jews and still welcome others. I believe Judaism demands of us no less. We Jews are no mere interest group. We are a community of eternal faith and values. Our faith and hard won place in our country require us to care for those who are as unfortunate now as we once were.

We must protect our children’s Jewish future, of course! But we are not permitted to ignore the cries of children of strangers either!

We don’t have to choose between us and them. There is a third way. Our Sages teach that Abraham had a third child, one only hinted at in the Torah. Believe it or not, a daughter.

The Midrash teaches that the Torah states: “**And God blessed Abraham with everything [ba-kol]**” ([Genesis 24:1](#)). The Sages disagree about what “*ba-kol*” means. **Rabbi Meir says:** The blessing is **that he did not have a daughter**. **Rabbi Yehuda says:** On the contrary, the blessing was **that he had a daughter...her name was Ba-kol.**” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 116b, commentary *Eitz Yosef*)

“**Ba-kol**” means everything. Abraham was blessed in everything, because he not only had sons but a daughter, from his last wife, Ketura.

This daughter’s name, **Ba-kol**, is what makes Abraham’s death peaceful despite his failures as a Dad. The Torah declares that Abraham died in good old age, at peace. Blessed because he had a daughter who was a blessing. Blessed because his estranged sons, Ishmael and Isaac, reconciled to bury him. (Gen. 25.8)

We aspire to this of **ba-kol**, as well, to be blessed in everything. We can take care of our own children *and* seek justice for other children as well. The path to this blessing of **ba-kol** was written more than 100 years ago by our own American Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, who, in 1883, famously wrote, in her poem, “The New Colossus:

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she

*With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

No more will we sacrifice immigrant children to the god of fear. We seek their blessing instead, for our sake as well as theirs.

We seek the blessings of Abraham and all his children, Ishmael, Isaac and Ba-kol, his daughter, to make all America's children, native born, dreamers, immigrants and refugees, safe and secure *ba-kol*, in everything, especially those who now suffer in detention camps on our borders.

This year I personally will work extensively with HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They helped so many of our families settle in this country. They helped pass on the blessing of the American Dream as we fled for their lives from the Czar and his pogroms. So we must do the same for immigrants who flee for theirs.

I will also be working with our local groups, Jewish Family and Community Services, ChangeAgency and Casa San Jose, which assist in welcoming newcomers to settle in our region. I will passionately oppose the slashing of the number of refugees our country will accept to mere 18,000, when so many, many more are in need of asylum and hope

Please let me know if you want to join me in this work. And if you disagree, come and talk to me! I am always eager to expand my views and learn from you without rancor.

No more children sacrificed to the false god of fear. No more children freezing on mats at the border. Rather we cherish all of Abraham's children for the blessings they are.

For we are all of Abraham's children, aren't we? And if we are, shouldn't we work to make his descendants blessed **Ba-kol**? In everything? Aren't we all Abraham's children? Aren't we?

May we bless our own children anew this year! May we find the courage to bless the children at our borders! May we lift our lamp beside the Golden Door for blessing for all.

Ba-kol – Blessing in everything. **Ba-kol** – Blessing for everyone. **Ba-kol** - Blessings in everything for us all! Blessings! Blessings! Blessings!