

Coming Down the Mountain
Rabbi Jennifer Schlosberg
Glen Rock Jewish Center
Second Day Rosh Hashanah
October 4, 2016 | 2 Tishrei 5777

5-4-3-2-1....Happy New Year! La la la la (sing Auld Lang Syne).

Wait! I get the impression that perhaps I am at the wrong place. Maybe wrong time? But, let's go with it for a minute. We are all too familiar with the New Year's scene, right? Party hats in bright colors and designs, noisemakers for the final countdown, and resolutions about weight loss, financial hopes, and professional goals.

Okay, so it might not be *that* New Year, but is today, Rosh Hashanah really *that* different? Sure, we trade it our party hats for a *kippah*. Instead of blowing those loud, modern-looking kazoos, we find ourselves with an ancient ram's horn, a *shofar*. And while we might not be marking this new year with a celebratory party full of confetti and Dick Clark, may he rest in peace, we celebrate the opportunity to change ourselves and grow from within. Part of this growth sometimes means going to places that challenge us in ways that just plain hurt.

We read this morning about the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac – that unbelievable portion in the Torah in which Abraham was put to a test as God called upon him to sacrifice his son Isaac upon a mountaintop. In this horrific near-death story, just as Abraham raises his hand with the knife to slaughter his son, an angel of God calls out to Abraham, telling him to stop. Isaac's life is spared.

While many might focus on the difficult questions of faith or even ask “How could Abraham ever raise his knife to his son?” I'd like to *dan l'chaf z'chut*, that is – give Abraham the benefit of the doubt and assume that this was an incredibly difficult burden placed upon him by God. The question is – which was the hardest part?

Indeed that was the very question of students of Rabbi Menachem Mendle of Kotzk, a 19th century Hasidic rabbi of Poland. It is told that his students, after reading about Isaac's near-death experience, asked their rabbi, also known as the Kotzker Rebbe "Rebbe, dear Rebbe, what was the hardest part of the Akeidah? Was it God's call to Abraham, claiming that he needed to sacrifice his son? Was it the long walk up the mountain, when Abraham was contemplating the significant action which he was about to take? Or, was it the binding, when Abraham literally raised the knife to his son?"

Answered the Kotzker Rebbe: "None of the above." "The hardest part of the Akeidah," he said, "was the coming down from the mountain."

What an unbelievable teaching by the Kotzker Rebbe. The hardest part for Abraham is the coming down from the mountain after nearly sacrificing his son. His message seems to be that, sure, we can experience the peak of tragedy as we literally go through the most gut-wrenching, heart-twisting, and life-changing experiences, but even those experiences are not the most difficult part. The most difficult part is the aftermath: not the surgery that we might undergo, but the long hours of physical therapy afterward; not the death of someone specifically, but how we go on with our lives without them; not a terror attack, which sometimes happens in a split second, but how we pick up the shrapnel and wounded bodies after all of the damage has been done.

There are countless examples in our world when the hardest part for us is coming down from the mountaintop of a difficult situation. Let's take the example of reality television shows like "The Biggest Loser" and "Extreme Makeover: Weight-Loss Edition" where real people like you and me are inspired to lose hundreds of pounds. But when they are interviewed at the end of their journey, they say it is not the hours in the gym or the soreness of their muscles that was the most difficult. The most difficult part is coming down from the mountain of hard work, when they need to maintain their weight and keep those pounds off.

In our own word... We just lost a significant leader for the state of Israel, Shimon Peres and we are confronted with questions like how we might ever be able to pursue peace without him. We think of the train crash at Hoboken, something which affected many of us so deeply and we wonder what it will be

like to pick up all of the broken pieces and rebuild our commutes and our lives again.

And so that's where we are right now. Right now – we're at this peak of the mountain. Just as Abraham experienced great trepidation before God as he nearly slaughtered his son, we too experience similar trepidation as we pound our chests during these during these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, asking for forgiveness from a year when we could have done better. We are like clay in God's hands and although we have some control over our destiny, these days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur remind us that to some extent, our lives are out of our hands. We give over our fate to God – and what a scary, fragile mountaintop that is to stand upon.

Now you might be saying to yourself, “but to me, I don't feel that trepidation. I feel so much potential, so much opportunity for future change, so much anticipation about the year ahead. It's not a scary mountaintop at all. I actually feel like I'm on the top of the world.” And if you say this, you are also right. But as the Kotzer Rebbe reminds us – the hardest part is not where we are right now, on this mountaintop – whether you see your mountaintop as a challenge or as a victory – the hardest part is when we come down off of that mountain of terror and disaster.

According to Rabbi David Wolpe, “The hardest part of Yom Kippur is not the fasting. The hardest part is two months later, when we are supposed to live by the promises we made. There is great drama in falling in love. But the test of a love is not in the falling; it is in the staying. The test of life is not in moments of passion that can stir the blood and push even the sluggard to new swiftness and resolve. The test of life is after the crisis has passed. Our worthiness is measured not in the pinnacle, but in the persistence.” [end quote]

And so I challenge us to think to ourselves: how long will this last? How long will we continue to feel a sense of awe in God's glory? How long will we continue to refrain from gossip? To make it a priority to change ourselves and improve our relationships with others? The hardest part is not now. The hardest part is coming down off of the mountain in just a few weeks.

And so now the question becomes just how do we sustain our High Holiday commitment to changes within ourselves? Well, let us look at what

Abraham did as he dealt with that long, heavy-hearted walk down that mountain. The Torah text teaches us 2 steps that Abraham took:

Step #1: וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו – Abraham returned to his young men. When we look at the Hebrew - וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם – it is in the singular - we learn that Abraham had to make this return down the mountain by himself. That tension of picking up our bootstraps and feeling so alone is something that we all experience at some point or another as we come down the mountain of a challenging situation. But, there is hope...because there is Step 2.

Step #2: וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל-בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע – They got up – Abraham and his helpers and they went together to Be'er Sheva. Here, Abraham is no longer alone. Although he took that difficult trek down the mountain by himself, when he arrives at the foot of the mountain, there are people there to greet him, and, more significantly, וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו – they got up and together they went to Be'er Sheva. Abraham's heart is so heavy after nearly sacrificing his son, but part of the journey in the coming down off of that tragic situation is having someone else lift us up. וַיִּקְמוּ – Together, they lifted each other up.

Abraham's journey teaches us that we should never be alone – people should always be at the bottom of the mountain to lift us up. But --- as we learn in Abraham's story, people can't be there for us if we don't meet them there, if we don't take those steps on our own to ask for forgiveness, to ask for help, to admit that we can't do it alone – as difficult as that might be. And so, we need to ask ourselves two questions about the coming year: Where am I going? And where are we going?

I want you to think about where you want to go this year regarding your hopes for a better year. Close your eyes and picture yourself, your new self. What do you look like? Do you hope to take some more time with your family? Do you hope to catch yourself when you feel a temper or anger coming on? Do you hope to give more of your time to volunteer causes? Now, I want you to take your goals and at some point do what Abraham did and meet others at the bottom of this mountain with those challenges. When you get home tonight or later in the week – share your goals with someone else. Look them in the eyes – perhaps even now, and ask them to hold you accountable – and mean it. In sharing your “Where am I going?” goals with other people, perhaps together we can address “where are we going?”

In his commentary on *parashat Vayetze*, the Torah portion which describes Jacob's journey to Beer Sheva, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, also known as the Degel Machene Efraim, comments on a dream that Jacob had along his journey. Jacob dreamed about a stairway that went from the ground all the way to the heavens. Angels of God went up and down this stairway. Says the Degel Machene Efraim – these angels – it was impossible for them to remain at one level, they constantly went up and down, up and down. But, he claims: הירידה הוא צורך עליה their descent is necessary for their ascent.

Their descent is necessary for their ascent. I suspect that based on this statement, the Degel Machene Efraim would claim that Abraham's journey was all for the purpose of a future spiritual ascension. Picture his long walk down the mountain, a difficult walk indeed. Wouldn't you be so angry with God? I could see Abraham saying "wait a second, didn't God just tell me to go and sacrifice my son Isaac, but then when I went to do that, I was told not to? God, why have you singled me out for this test? Or play such games with me? God, oh God, why have you put me through such trauma?"

And yet - הירידה הוא צורך עליה – our descent is necessary for our ascent. In order for us to be lifted up, it sometimes requires us to fall or even crawl down that mountain. After Abraham's trip down the mountain, his only option was moving on. And where did he go? The text says: וַיָּשָׁב אֲבְרָהָם, בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע. It says that he dwelled in Be'er Sheva. But וַיָּשָׁב the word signaling that Abraham dwelled in a land, also has the same root as *teshuvah*, or to return. After Abraham's going up and then down the mountain, his eventual settling was in many ways his spiritual ascent, his *teshuvah*, his return to God. Where are we going? When we work on ourselves and when we join others at the bottom of their mountain, we join them in the very presence of the Divine.

Each New Year's Eve in Time Square that infamous ball drops signaling the start of a New Year. But I would argue that part of that ball's descent is an ascent of opportunity. Yes, the hardest part for Abraham, and for us, is the coming down from that mountain. But with the difficult task of descent comes the reward of a spiritual ascent, of *teshuvah*, a return to God.

Oh, God, source of ultimate compassion and forgiveness: We have been to the mountaintop with Abraham. We have seen the horror, the fear, and felt

the disbelief. We have sometimes lost faith as we stood in the face of Your constant tests being thrown at us from different directions. And now --- on this holy day of Rosh Hashanah, we stand upon a mountaintop of opportunities, a mountaintop of hope, of promise, of religious redemption. We so look forward to a better, brighter year. And yet, we know that the possibility for change occurs not just today, but in the weeks and months that lie ahead. Take our hands as we descend from the holy space that we're in today. Send us angels, as you did for Abraham, that welcome us at the foot of our transformative mountaintops. May our descent be one of true religious ascent, a spiritual call of *teshuvah*, a return to Your good ways. Amen.

Shannah tovah.