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RH 5781

We Have A Lot of Living to Do!

Our Torah reading for the morning of Rosh HaShanah is a familiar one. Akedat Yitzhak, the binding of Isaac, the reading from the book of Genesis that has disturbed, agitated and discomfited Jews for millenia. You know it.

God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Abraham raises his knife to kill his son, and at the last moment, an angel stops the hand of Abraham. Abraham looks up, sees a ram in the thicket and offers the ram as a sacrifice. Isaac is spared. Abraham's faith, his willingness to offer his own child as a sacrifice, is proven to God.

But the story does not end without trauma. The midrash says that Isaac was blinded as he lay on the altar, by the tears of his father as he stood over him with the knife. Forever after, Isaac's sight was impaired. And in the Torah, our matriarch Sarah, Isaac's mother, dies immediately after the binding of her son. According to the midrash, she died of shock at her son's near escape from death. And every year on Rosh Hashana we remember her: the wailing sounds of the shofar recall the anguished cries of Sarah.

It's not an easy story that graces our liturgy on Rosh HaShana morning. We object to a God who seems to demand the sacrifice of a beloved son; and we object to a father so willing to obey God's call that he offers his child. We object to Isaac, who is not an infant or a toddler -- he's strong enough to carry a pile of wood up the mountain -- and yet seems to so passively acquiesce to his fate on the altar.

Why is this story given to us on our holy day? What does it have to teach us? Why must we read this haunting tale at the new year, as the central part of our Rosh HaShanah service? Perhaps the anguish and terror of Akedat Yitzchak is the whole point. It's a story that has put us on notice for

thousands of years. Our ancestors made sure we knew this story -- this story about the fragility and precariousness of life; this story that reminds us how close death is; this story that shakes our faith, that shakes our world.

This year the Binding of Isaac speaks to us especially, for our world has been shaken. So many were bound on the altar this year. So many lay helpless in the ICU, unable to breathe; and so many, unlike Isaac, never got up again. They were not spared. If anything has been clear this year, it is the fragility of life. 200,000 dead in this country alone. All of us have been impacted by this strange disease and many lives have been permanently altered. Some in our community have lost family members and friends, neighbors and colleagues. We hear heartbreaking stories of the ones who died: the affable doorman in New York City, the loving grandmother in Florida. The Holocaust survivor, the new immigrant. The musician, the teacher.

Each of them was a whole world. With their deaths, worlds have been lost; and lives have been devastated by grief.

I also know that so many in our congregation faced other hardships and struggles. Bereavement; serious illness; job loss; economic pressures. The significant strains on marriages and friendships. Addiction. Depression. Loneliness. Isolation. One member of our synagogue told me that they haven't felt the physical embrace of another since March.

So I thought to myself: this year, aren't we all Abraham and Isaac? Don't we all feel tested and bound? Don't we all feel that the knife is above us and we are searching for a ram in the thicket? Wherever we look, we face challenges.

Consider a partial list of what we've endured in the past few months:

* An epidemic of epic scale that has especially harmed the most vulnerable members of society: the elderly and medically compromised, the poor, people of color, low wage workers;

- * Our leaders' inability to promote and follow scientific guidelines that would help mitigate the disease;
- * The start of a school year that has forced heroic teachers into on-line classes and overwhelmed parents and children into zoom rooms rather than classrooms;
- * An ongoing assault on trusted institutions of government ,ranging from the Center for Disease Control to the Post Office;
- * A disturbing erosion of empathy for one another;
- * The continuing plague of gun violence;
- * A hunger crisis, including many who have never before stood in line at food pantries;
- * An upsurge in hate, bigotry and anti-Semitism;
- * Mass racial unrest - fueled by systemic racism - that this country hasn't experienced in a generation;
- * An ongoing assault on truth, facts, and scientific expertise;
- * The worst fires the West has ever seen, and an unwillingness at the federal level to actively and forcefully confront climate change and climate deniers;
- * Obscene attempts to strip Americans of the sacred right to vote;
- * Flagrant violation of the norms of democracy at the highest levels of government;
- * The continued rise of authoritarian leaders throughout the world who deny minority rights and quash the opposition;
- * Leaders who divide our country for personal and electoral gain, rather than heal, comfort, and bring us together;

I know I missed some. Add your own.

I hear some of you saying, Jon, this sermon is getting too political -- stay away. And I agree -- there is no place for partisan politics from the Bimah. Other than reminding you of the essential obligation to vote, I would never say which candidate or which party to vote for or against. Yet I do believe that religion has a significant role to play in society; it offers a moral perspective that is essential for our country. In times of national strife, we especially need religious individuals and institutions to have the courage to

speak out in the public arena, to offer ethical guidance, inspiration and comfort.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York writes: “If what some people mean by ‘religion should stay out of politics’ is that we should never engage in the social challenges of our times – never speak about the here and now, only about the hereafter – it is something Judaism cannot accept. The assertion that religious institutions should stay out of politics is, itself, a political stance. It takes you off the field – the public arena – where the contest of values will be determined – and leaves the field open to others, who have different values than we do.”

So on this Rosh Hashana I ask you:

Should we really aid and support fire victims and ignore the reality of climate change?

Should we really comfort the mourner of a COVID patient and not ask if that death was preventable?

Should we really tell the story of Passover and not speak out for the refugees of our own day?

Should we really house the homeless -- as we do in our own social hall -- and ignore the policies that cause their homelessness?

Should we really teach our kids the values of honesty, and not call out the deceivers and dishonest brokers in our country?

Should we really mourn the tragic death of unarmed Black men and women and not vigorously fight racism?

Our Beth Am clergy will continue to speak out for Jewish values and apply them to the world in which we live. If we slip up or if you disagree, please speak out and speak your truth. We will no doubt get it wrong sometimes. Hold us accountable. We represent diverse experiences and backgrounds and beliefs. I believe that diversity makes us stronger. But above all, I believe that we must engage in the important issues of our time.

I am inspired by the words of a great faith leader, Reverend William Barber, who says: “When faith and church becomes merely a place for privatized religion and privatized salvation and privatized relationship with the divine, it is actually counter to Scripture. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) the Scriptures declare, like in Isaiah 10, “Woe unto those who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights.” So whenever religious bodies just go through the motions of internal religiosity, and do not deal with social structures of injustice, then they become accommodating.”

So here at Beth Am we will work together to address the challenges of this troubled time through the texts and stories and teachings of our tradition. So we do today, lifting up the story of the Binding of Isaac in the midst of the great test we are facing as a country.

Abraham as we know, passes God’s test. His faith is resolute, his son lives. They are scarred, distraught, shaken, but they come down from Mt. Moriah-- only to face another painful challenge: the death of Sarah. Like us, Abraham must have asked himself, “How much more of this can I take? How long will this go on?”

But the next chapter of Genesis teaches that Abraham picked himself up and did what had to be done: “*Vayakom Avraham mei-al pnei mei-to*— Abraham arose from before his dead.” He mourned for his wife, and arranged for her burial, at the cave of Machpela, the place where someday he and Isaac and Jacob will be buried. And then, slowly, over time, Abraham went forward.

As Rabbi Peter Rubinstein writes: “One step, probably stumbling, at first, then walking with resolve and finally, we would hope he ran forward. The story tells us that Abraham married again and had more children. Sad, scarred, aching, but Abraham moved on! Carrying memory, feeling the sadness of what might have happened, he moved on! Burying his dead, he moved on!”

How will we move on and move forward in this devastating time, as individuals and as a community? First, by openly acknowledging our sense of loss. For here we are, coming together in this strange way. Virtually. It is so hard not to see you. Not to feel the warm embrace of congregants. Not to witness the blossoming of our high schoolers. Not to smile at the newlyweds and the new babies. Not to hug the mourners who come to the High Holidays, for the first time without a partner. I so yearn to share challah and wine with you. To hold the sacred Torah as we reach out a siddur or tallit. More than anything, I want to hear the majestically haunting blast of the shofar in a room filled with people.

Second: we move forward by recognizing how much we need each other -- not just for emotional connection, but as a spur to action. We need each other, we need our strong shared sense of right and wrong. We need one another to motivate and agitate toward the world we want to live in. Even in these difficult days, we can continue to do that. So reach out! Protest! Write! Challenge! Lobby! Speak truth! Vote! Get out the vote! These are the acts that befit this sacred season. These are the acts that our country needs in this time of uncertainty. These are the acts of a faithful community. In the words of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburgh (z"l) "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."

Finally, we move forward by holding fast to hope. There is a well-known story about a Jew in Spain during the terrible days of the Spanish Inquisition. First his business was confiscated by the authorities and then his home. Then he was deported. While waiting to board his ship, he was separated from his family. All this Jew had left was a small bag filled with old clothes. The cruel captain of the ship dropped him off on the desert coast of North Africa, leaving him there to die.

What could the Jew do? He picked up his bag and set off to search for civilization. But after a few days alone in the desert he threw down his bag, looked up to heaven and cried out, "send the angel of death! Now, I am ready."

In front of him appeared the black figure of the Angel of Death, who said, "You called for me?" The Jew thought for a minute and replied, "Yes -- help me put this bag on my back again, will you? I still have some living to do."

All of us have a lot of living to do. Much has changed this year, but this remains: the power to affirm life in everything we do. Perhaps, that is the ultimate message of Rosh Hashanah: life is precious, and it is ours to live. On these days of awe, let us realize the power we all have. The power to begin a new year, to transcend helplessness and despair; to marshal our inner resources; to persevere in the face of uncertainty and move forward to the better time that awaits us. Let us hold on to hope, for hope gives us strength

L'chaim -- to life!

[[https://staging.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/moving_on_r
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([https://www.streetroots.org/news/2019/11/08/william-j-barber-ii-calls-
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