

Drash – Erev Rosh Hashanah 2 5781

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In a scant 12 verses the Torah recounts one of its most harrowing stories, the binding of Isaac and God’s test of Abraham’s faith. This universal narrative, retold not only in the Jewish and Christian traditions but in the Muslim tradition as well, speaks out to me personally as the father of three sons. To gauge the power of this story, I propose a close reading of it—paying particular attention to the parsing out of details as they relate to the parent-child relationship.

“Take, pray, your son, your only one” This initial reference to Isaac is meant to distinguish him from Ishmael, Abraham’s first son by Hagar, Sarah’s handmaiden. The text thus makes a special point that Isaac is the closest (“the only”) son because he is the only legitimate son that Abraham has by Sarah.

It reinforces Isaac’s unique status by further qualifying him as the one “whom you love.” Now, it may seem only natural, at first glance, that God should ascribe the relation between Abraham and Isaac as one of filial love. Yet, looking back over the preceding 21 chapters of

Genesis, one notes no mention of a parent's love for his or her child. Only when we get to the birth of Isaac is Sarah's love expressed as jealousy toward Ishmael, the older son, lest he make a claim on Abraham's patrimony. It is true, in another instance, that Abraham's anguish at losing Ishmael can be described as an expression of his love for the son. To Sarah's jealous love is matched Hagar's equally strong love for Ishmael, movingly expressed by leaving the boy under a bush and moving away so she won't have to hear his cries as he dies. But these expressions of love are what I would call circumstantial love.

By "circumstantial love" I mean a love engendered by a set of circumstances that the people in question have control over. Sarah and Hagar's love for their sons are born of their fervent desire to protect their child. While Abraham is clearly in control of his feelings toward his legitimate son, the love for Isaac is designated by God. Isaac is, after all, the child granted to Abraham and Sarah after many, many years of prayer, a birth so miraculous that it makes Sarah laugh. This is thus a love of a different order. We hear of it not from Abraham's own lips but rather from the voice of God. It is as though Isaac, though loved by

mother, handmaidens, servants and others presumably, is imbued with a divine love bestowed upon him by God, at a higher level, transcendent.

This helps explain God's otherwise heartless testing of Abraham: commanding him to sacrifice his own beloved son. If God has already designated the boy as the *loved son* of Abraham, then the plan loses its heartlessness. Isaac is a token, a symbol of the human's connection to God. It is as if God were saying to Abraham: "Bring to me your most precious possession, *that which I have already sanctified by love.*"

With the binding of Isaac, in other words, we enter a new stage of our human history in its connection to the divine. We are no longer the dutiful, grateful recipients of *mitzvot*, no longer mindful of our relationships to each other within the tribe and without, no longer the standard-bearers for justice and truth. Now we are touched by a unique human emotion that makes interpersonal relationships more complex. Love. You are to bring forth not simply your son, not simply your only son, but the son whom you love. It is no simple exchange, no routine sacrifice, no easy appeasement of a demanding God. Now it is bluntly, "Give me what you love."

It is interesting to note that in Hebrew the words for love and give have the same root: l'ahov and l'havia. From this perspective, God is saying "Give me what you have been given." Or, "Give love." Or, "Love to give what you have been given." Whatever the case may be, Abraham can be seen in the pitiable position of "owing" something to God that now must be given up.

It is in the general context of giving something up that the story speaks to us today. Imagining the sacrifice of a child is nearly impossible; but imagining giving up things dear to us has now become a part of our everyday life. These are the questions we are faced with during the current pandemic. What are we willing to give up to protect ourselves and others? How much must we love something to refuse giving it up for the duration? And these are the values spoken of in our parasha, personal sacrifice and love.

Yet no sooner have I suggested this parallel to our sacrifices during the pandemic than I realize that the comparison pales. Our current sacrifices are tiny when juxtaposed with the sacrifice demanded of Abraham. Thus, the first lesson we can draw from today's parasha is that

personal deprivation should be placed in a broader framework: if we are being asked to deny ourselves certain liberties and pleasures—free assembly, nights out with friends, even everyday intimacy—think of these in the context of truly epic sacrifices, such as that of Abraham.

The one value absent from our current situation is faith. Abraham's faith in God remains steadfast. Perhaps it is precisely this absent element that makes us the most uneasy. Are we being tested to keep faith in the wisdom of our leaders, or in the ultimate beneficence of science? Are we facing a trial of faith in God, who we know would never forsake us?

I do not propose answers to these questions. Rather, I suggest that we hold onto the love ascribed to Abraham for Isaac at the moment he submits to the test of his faith. Realizing that God is not likely to make such an awful request of me, I stand solid in my love for my sons. Even without being asked, I am ready to sacrifice all the rest of life's pleasures for them. Let us, then, acknowledge with renewed energy the people and things that we love, beyond sacrifice, during these trying times. In so doing, the sense of personal sacrifice, I believe, will dwindle before our eyes—and by next year may be gone. L'Shana tova!