

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 5777 – FORGIVENESS

In a few moments, we will begin our Torah service:

This and each Rosh Hashanah we read *The Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac. Abraham is called to bring Isaac to Mount Moriah as a sacrifice. He awakes early to set out on what I consider a horrific journey, bringing Isaac, two servants, and some wood for the altar.

We know how the story goes, and if not we'll have a chance to hear it and follow along in the English. At the climactic moment in which Isaac is bound to the altar and Abraham lifts the knife in his hand an angel of God calls out: Abraham, Abraham, do not lift your hand against the boy. Abraham looks up, and voila there is a ram entangled in the bushes. He sacrifices the ram and everyone lives happily ever after...

NOT.

The very next Torah portion begins by announcing the death of Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. The Midrash tells us that word traveled back to Sarah faster than Abraham did, and the word that traveled back was that Abraham actually slaughtered Isaac. Sarah's grief killed her before her husband and unharmed son returned home.

As the narrative in the book of Genesis continues, Isaac never speaks to Abraham again. Abraham, through his servants acquires a wife for Isaac, Rebekah. But father and son never see one another nor speak to one another again.

It is true that rabbis rarely focus on this sad ending to Abraham's story. The rabbinic talking points coalesce around Abraham's loyalty and faith.

Interestingly the Midrash begins the story of the Akedah with a conversation between God and *hasatan* (the adversary) that mimics the beginning of the Book of Job which we read on Yom Kippur.

The rabbis say that at the feast celebrating Isaac's weaning from Sarah's breast *hasatan*-the adversary goads the Holy One: Master of the universe, considering this lavish feast Abraham is throwing for his son, you'd think he might have saved a single turtle-dove as an offering to You? Don'tcha?

The Holy One replied:

Please, this feast is for his son. Anyway, were I to ask him to sacrifice that very son for me, he would.

Really? Let's see...

Two stories, the Binding of Isaac and Job, both begin with a casual bet between God and hasatan-the adversary. In each we celebrate the characters' loyalty. Yet I believe the true lessons of these stories are much deeper and far more important than blind faith.

In each case, Abraham and Job are faced with the kinds of challenges in their personal relationships that we experience in our families and social networks.

Job's wife and friends don't understand why Job remains steadfast in his faith despite the suffering he endures. His wife wants him to blaspheme God and his friends push him to figure out what he must have done wrong to be punished so. Job holds onto his righteous indignation until God instructs him to fasten his seatbelt and face the truth. Job learns that his human perspective is lost in the immensity of God's creation. He is forced to let go of his assumptions about what's fair and not fair. When he does let go, he finds relief. His health and wealth are restored.

Abraham also possesses a certain righteous indignation he will have to let go. The young trailblazer who leaves his hometown to found a multitudinous nation, ultimately sacrifices his relationship with his life partner, Sarah, and his son, Isaac, (not to mention Hagar and Ishmael whom he sacrificed earlier). In the end of his story he does right by Sarah, burying her with respect and love. And he does right by Isaac, finding him a wife with whom he will produce and raise Jacob, Israel, the namesake of the Jewish people today. Finally, he finds a new wife, builds a family with her, and settles down to a quiet, uneventful life.

Two incredibly impassioned ancestors who have to learn to let go.

Letting go of indignation, letting go of false assumptions that once felt so real and true, letting go of expectations that set us up for disappointment again and again, and letting go of grudges that get in the way of loving one another...This is the work of the season.

The days to come between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the days during which we turn to one another and ask forgiveness.

Our Kol Nidrei service will begin as always with the teaching from the Talmud: For sins between the individual and God, God atones. For wrongdoing among individuals, God atones only after we apologize, make right, and are forgiven.

Maimonides teaches us how to do this relationship work:

First we own up to our mistake or failure to choose a better course of action by righting the wrong. This may simply require words: I'm sorry. I was out of line when I said that. Or it may require compensation for damages or injury.

Only then, do we ask for forgiveness.

Interestingly Maimonides then proceeds to tell us what to do when we've approached someone for forgiveness and they refuse. We are taught to bring three witnesses and ask again, a second and third time. After the third time, even if the person continues to withhold forgiveness, we are released from our obligation and God will atone.

Finally Maimonides reminds us:

It is forbidden to be cruel and difficult to appease, rather a person must be quick to forgive and difficult to anger. When the sinner asks for forgiveness one should give it willingly and wholeheartedly.

The rabbis of the Talmud caution us that excessive attention to past misdeeds can be an obstacle to putting them behind us. They quote a verse from Proverbs (26:11): As a dog who returns to his own vomit, so is a fool who persists in his folly.

So what is forgiveness in Jewish language? *S'lichah*, the Hebrew word for forgiveness, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender. It is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is more an act of mercy than grace.

**We are commanded in the Torah (Leviticus 19:17-18) after all:
Do not take revenge or bear grudges. Do not hate your brother in your heart.**

The Talmud (Yoma 23a) explains:

Revenge is when I ask my friend to lend me something and he doesn't, so I repay him in kind when he asks to borrow something of mine.

A grudge is when I ask my friend to lend me something and he declines, and then when he asks to borrow something of mine I say: Yes, even though you didn't lend to me when I asked.

We are instructed (Taanit 20a) to be pliant like a reed and not hard like a cedar. All who act mercifully, that is forgivingly, toward their fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven (Rosh Hashanah 17a). Finally, Imitate God by being compassionate and forgiving. God will in turn have compassion on you, and pardon your offenses (Shabbat 133b).

Now we can understand these rabbinic teaching literally: we forgive others and God, in turn, forgives us. Or we can translate them into more human terms: when we do the inner work of letting go, transformation occurs.

Job is restored once he lets go of his anger and resentment about being punished when he did nothing wrong. Abraham lives a quiet, peaceful life once he fulfills his obligation to bury Sarah, marries off Isaac, and ultimately lets go of the guilt he feels for the damage he has caused in his first family.

Forgiving is no easy task. There's an old Jewish joke about a married couple, Saul and Ethel Rosenberg. Saul did something really stupid. Ethel chewed him out for it. Saul apologized and the couple made up. However, from time to time, Ethel would mention what Saul had done. One day Saul finally confronted her: Why do you keep bringing that up? I thought our policy was to forgive and forget.

It is, Ethel said, I just don't want *you* to forget that *I've* forgiven and forgotten.

Last year, during this season, my grandmother and mother died within days of one another. Many here reached out to me with compassion for the shock that accompanied the loss and grief in which I was swimming.

One member of our congregation, a dear friend and quite frankly a very wise woman to whom many of us turn for counsel particularly around death, gave me an incredibly profound piece of advice. She suggested that I not only forgive my grandmother and mother for whatever unfinished business might be lingering in my psyche, but that I also forgive myself for having inherited the qualities in my mother and grandmother I don't like.

I thought I understood the commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). But I didn't until that day. She was right. While I had already in my adult life put a great deal of effort into growing up and forgiving my parents for their mistakes, I did and do still cringe when I catch myself manifesting their mannerisms and engaging in their behavioral patterns.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, teaches this lesson comparing a flower seed and the fully flowered plant from which it comes. He says: you cannot say the seed and the plant are exactly the same nor can you say they are not the same. Part of maturation is separating ourselves from our parents, but we always carry their genetic material and the habits that made up our environment as young, developing beings.

Back to the Torah reading we are about to hear...the brutal father-son moment atop Mount Moriah. Abraham poised, knife in hand and Isaac bound to the

altar.

Tikkun Magazine founding editor, Michael Lerner, wrote an entire chapter on this moment in his book, Jewish Renewal. He says at this moment, Abraham looked down at his son to find the right place to strike with the knife and instead he caught Isaac's wide-eyed stare. He looked into Isaac's eyes, and for the first time he saw Isaac, not as an object for his use but as a human being, as his son, and he could not proceed with the slaughter.

While Abraham fulfills his paternal obligation to Isaac by finding him Rebekah, this son never speaks to his father again. For Isaac there is no forgiveness.

Isaac goes on to raise two sons, Jacob and Esau. He favors Esau's strength and manliness, rejecting Jacob's softer nature. Rebekah manipulates Isaac as Sarah manipulated Abraham, and the oldest son is ultimately cast out, cheated of his birthright and inheritance in a second generation.

Of course the narrative of the Torah requires this course of events for the development of the nation of Israel, the Jewish people. But when we put ourselves in the characters' shoes, the emotional damage is palpable. We get it because we live it in our own families and community.

Ultimately forgiveness has nothing to do with letting other people off the hook for their wrongdoing. Ultimately forgiveness is about letting go of the baggage that hinders us from becoming the people we wish to be.

I do believe that steadfastness and loyalty are admirable virtues. But I also believe the deeper lessons of our sacred literature transcend virtues and lead us to opportunities for real transformation.

Each Rosh Hashanah we envision our higher selves. We imagine what we might accomplish and be in the coming year. Each Yom Kippur the slate is wiped clean...so long as we succeed in leaving the baggage of the past that doesn't serve us any longer behind.

It's all about forgiveness, compassion for those who've hurt or angered us, and mercy for ourselves. Letting go, so something new can happen...L'shanah tovah tikatayvu, may we be inscribed this year as the we we wish to be. Amen.