

**And God Remembered Sarah**  
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**Rosh Hashanah Day – September 30, 2008**

I've always felt uncomfortable with the passage we read from the Torah this morning. As a child the Akedat Yitzchak – the story of the binding of Isaac terrified me, and as an adult it angered me. Why would God want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? What sort of test is that? And even worse, what sort of father is Abraham that he said yes?

And reading the Akedat Yitzchak on Rosh Hashanah never made sense to me. This is the birthday of the world after all. This is when we speak of life, of beginnings, of wiping the slate clean! This is supposed to be a joyous day, a day of celebration!

So what are we doing reading this story about a God who demands a father to put his child on the alter of his faith and offer him up? And this man – Abraham - who has argued so eloquently in defense of others, bargaining with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, is silent as he quietly obeys God's request without even a single question.

Rather than drawing me closer to my faith, this story breaks my heart. I wonder if this story breaks God's heart as well. Surely God was expecting an impassioned argument from Abraham on behalf of his child, or even a gasp of shock or despair. But, no, God's request is met with blind obedience, and with silence.

So what are we to learn from this somber tale? And what are we doing reading it today, of all days?

As it turns out, we're not supposed to read it today. The Binding of Isaac is the traditional reading for the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Rosh Hashanah. What is traditionally read today is the story of Sarah discovering that she is pregnant. Unfortunately for us, the editors of the Reform machzor did not feel the traditional reading was compelling enough, and swapped the story of Sarah with tomorrow's reading, and for those Reform congregations that observe two days of Rosh Hashanah they added the story of Creation as the alternative reading.

But I think our rabbis made a mistake. These two passages – the traditional readings for the first and second days are companion pieces of the theology of the High Holidays – they are about life and death, and about our very survival.

When we skip the first passage we lose some important perspective on the Binding of Isaac.

The traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh HaShanah begins: “*v’Adonai pakad et Sarah, c’asher amar, va’ya’as Adonai l’Sarah ca’asher di’ber*” – and God remembered Sarah as promised, doing for Sarah as had been said” (Gen. 21:1).

What did God remember Sarah for? For life! God remembered the promise that had been made to Sarah that she would have a child. We are supposed to read that passage today, to remind us that God did remember Sarah, even though it had appeared that she had been forgotten. Sarah’s story is one about faith, remembrance and life renewed.

The theme not only of remembrance, but specifically God remembering us so that we will live, runs throughout the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. It is the theme of the traditional Torah reading, the haftarah reading, and is even the name of one of the sections in the Shofar surface – Zichronot – remembrances.

The story of Sarah is one of hope. In this portion, God is the life-giver, the Creator, the One who remembers us, and answers our prayers.

The story of the Binding of Isaac is very different. It is the story of a God who demands from us that which is most precious to us. A God that tests our faith with painful personal trials. And while ultimately life is spared in the story of Isaac, there is a cost. Abraham’s blind obedience cost him his relationship with his son and with his God.

Abraham and Isaac become estranged. The Torah tells us they went up the mountain together, but Abraham comes down the mountain alone.

So how do we reconcile these two stories, these two images of God – these two very different images of faith?

I remember being engaged in heavy theological debates with one of my professors from HUC. He had been a teenager during WWII, and a military chaplain in the 1950's. He remembered vividly the early accounts of the concentration camps, and the reports of the many wars that threatened the existence of the Jewish state. He had lost relatives to pogroms prior to WWII as well as in the Shoah, and he was angry at God.

How could God have abandoned our people, he wondered? How could so many Jews in one century have been murdered? What price must we pay for our faith? Why he wondered must the State of Israel be tested again and again with its very existence being put on the alter?

And yet, my teacher, like Abraham, did not shy away from God's call and has continued to serve his people throughout his life – even as he was angry at God for the price he felt we have been asked to pay for being Jewish.

For my teacher, the story of the Akedat Yitzchak was personal, and it gave voice to his own God wrestling.

And like my professor, I have also wondered, why must there be such a price asked of us to be Jewish? Why must we defend our very existence in a way that no other faith or people must?

This year we celebrate Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday – and yet, even in the midst of celebrating – we also aware of Israel's ongoing vulnerability. The town of Sderot, which is near the Gaza border has been blanketed with rocket attacks every day for the last seven years. And the right of Israel's very existence continues to be questioned throughout the world.

Earlier this month the Washington-based Pew Research Center released a recent survey that showed that anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe. The study showed that 46 percent of Spaniards, 36 percent of Poles and 34 percent of Russians viewed Jews unfavorably, while the same was true for 25 percent of Germans, and 20 percent of the French.

Only England did not show a marked increase, with 9 percent of the British people having negative feelings towards Jews, which compares with the 7% that is held in America. These are startling numbers.

Perhaps part of my difficulty in relating to the Akedat Yitzchak is because being Jewish in America has been easy for me. I have not experienced institutionalized or legalized anti-Semitism. No universities, organizations or neighborhoods have closed their doors to me because of who I am. I have been free to be friends with and to love whomever I want without fear.

And the most profound expression of anti-Semitism that I have ever experienced was the fire-bombing of our temple. And even with that, the hate that was displayed was countered overwhelmingly with the love and support of our non-Jewish friends and neighbors in Sacramento and across the country.

But I wonder if the story of the binding of Isaac is more personal for our brothers and sisters who live in other lands and experience anti-Semitism on a regular basis, and see their very existence in jeopardy.

I believe that for those of us who live here, in freedom and in safety, when we read the Akedat Yitzchak, we have an obligation to remember the Jews who live in other countries, whose very Jewishness puts them at risk. I believe that we have an obligation to reach out to them through organizations like the World Union of Progressive Judaism and ARZA – the American Reform Zionist Association, and do what we can to assist them so that they can not only survive, but thrive as we do here.

Our tradition teaches that Abraham failed God's test. God was disappointed in Abraham in not arguing with God, and as a result God never spoke directly to Abraham again.

I believe that this midrash teaches us that we are not meant to be sacrificed on the alter of our faith – that God does not want us to march quietly to our death, or our extinction – but to fight for life.

Perhaps it is because I live here, and enjoy the freedom to practice my faith and to express my ethnic identity without fear of dire repercussions that it is the story of Sarah that speaks to me more. Because her story is more about hope and faith than physical survival.

Here in America – we do not need to worry the same way about physical threats, but we do need to worry about the state of Judaism as our faith.

This time of year invites us to engage in self-reflection and ask what sort of Judaism are we passing on to the next generation. What are we teaching them by our example? What role does Judaism play in our own lives? Does it provide meaning and comfort? A sense of community? Does it inspire us through its teachings and its faith? Are we engaged in life-long study, the pursuit of justice and tikkun olam? Do we make participation in our community a priority? And, do we continue to make Judaism fresh and relevant to the lives that we live, or do we allow it wither into irrelevance?

Sarah wanted a child, not only as someone to love, but it also meant that her values and her faith would live on long after she left this earth.

When Sarah, at the age of 90, was told she would she would become pregnant, she laughed. When Abraham was asked to sacrifice his child, he responded with silent obedience.

God responded to Sarah's laughter by fulfilling the promise that was made, and giving her the gift of life. God responded to Abraham by turning away, and matching silence with silence.

When we read these two stories side by side, we are reminded that we have a role to play in our own destiny.

Both of these stories contain Divine Blessings, rewards for our faith and our persistence. Both try to find meaning in the trials that life presents us with.

And ultimately the message for both is the same – choose life, not death.

May we be blessed like Sarah and be remembered for life and for blessing, and may we learn from Abraham's mistakes, drawing our children closer to us in love and with a protecting embrace, may we reach out to Jews in all lands offering support and connection. And at this time of judgment, may God judge all people with compassion and kindness, and may the Holy One grant us life and peace.

*Ken yehi ratzon* - may this be God's will.