

High Holiday D'Var RH2 2012 Reisman Service Temple Emanuel 9/18/12

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It is often said that there are only two themes in great literature: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. In the Akedah story that we read today, aka the Binding of Isaac, we have not one, but in fact **both** classic elements. The journey is obvious; Abraham and Isaac travel for three days at God's command to Mount Moriah and undergo God's test.

But who is the stranger? It seems, at least initially, that we have three "strangers," Abraham, Isaac and God.

The Abraham of the Akedah story is a stranger to us. Where is the more familiar, iconoclastic Avram, who according to the Midrash, smashed his father's idols and taunted Terah about their lack of abilities? The Abraham who argues boldly with Gd to save the people of Sodom? Who is this man who now does not raise a word of protest at God's request for infanticide, and an ultimate act of compliance and obedience?

Isaac too is a stranger to us. Whether he is seen a boy or as the Midrash tells us, as an 37 year old adult able to carry the wood for his own sacrifice, we do not know much at all about him. He is an unknown and becomes the least known of the patriarchs.

And God, how can God be a stranger? Like Abraham, God appears to act so differently. How can we reconcile Gd's promises to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky, with this unimaginable test of loyalty? With the possibility that Abraham's line will be wiped out through his own hand and devotion?

This year, I'd like to consider how do we become close to God or remain strangers? How do we become close to each other or remain distant and apart?

To address this we must first ask, how does one have a relationship w/ God? The Biblical model is to do so primarily through our actions, that is, to follow God's commandments. However, even if we are observant, even very observant, we often

have difficulty in thinking about God, let alone communicating with, or becoming close to, God. For ex., at the Temple Emanuel Retreat last year, Rabbi Robinson asked participants to talk about how we relate to God. One congregant replied, “That’s easy. I’m Shomer Shabbos, I keep kosher in and out of the house, I go to shul 6 days a week---and I never think about God. “

The problem of relating to God is compounded during the High Holidays when the language and metaphors of the Machzor, while familiar to us from years of experience, are also foreign and off-putting. The image of God as a King, God as a Judge of our individual trials just doesn’t work for many Jews today. We may tell ourselves that it just isn’t very sophisticated or rational to think of God as having a personal interest in us as individuals.

We also know that old baggage gets in the way of getting closer to God. One of my patients told me she was an agnostic. She said that her father, not surprisingly also an agnostic, became an atheist when her mother died and her father became angry with God. My patient was surprised when I said, “Your father doesn’t seem to be an atheist. In fact, he has a close relationship with God; it’s just based on anger.”

Today, we tend to think of relationships and getting close to others in terms of self-disclosure, that is what we choose to tell or “share” about ourselves with another. Telling about ourselves is risky in that we can’t be guaranteed that the listener will appreciate or value what we are saying. It also is risky in that when we disclose we tend to explore our own thoughts more deeply. While this is generally beneficial, it can also be troubling, as we communicate lesser known or difficult and confusing parts of ourselves. Getting close to another involves a certain amount of risk.

In addition to deepening relationships through telling various aspects of our lives, we increase their intimacy and intensity when we communicate “here and now” or directly vs. “there and then” or indirectly. Thus, saying, “I became nervous when you said that” or “I care about you very much” are more intimate statements than talking about another person. Here and now communication tends to be reserved for those w/whom we feel a special bond or affection. In turn, communicating this way creates those special bonds.

We see this in the Akedah story, where there is an odd mix of direct, intense communication and, less direct, banal, or no communication. For ex., God

immediately raises the intensity of the Akedah story by his direct command to sacrifice Isaac. In fact, God turns up the intensity even further, almost taunting Abraham through phrases that escalate rhythmically: Kach na et Bincha, et Yichidicha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak” “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love.” Of course, God could have just said “Your son,” but sometimes more is more.

This intensity of God’s commands contrasts with the absence of direct communication between Abraham and Isaac. Walking together for three days, neither speaks of the task confronting them other than Isaac’s question about the absence of the sheep and his father’s practical response that God will provide one. Biblical scholar Karen Armstrong wonders about the silence on Moriah, “Did [Isaac] plead w/Abraham? Or did he lie down passively on the improvised altar...?” And after the trial is over, the father-son alienation is palpable through the silence that pervades their relationship until Abraham dies. And a conversation between Abraham and Sarah is never mentioned. Can you imagine a more alienated family? In the world of intimate communication and relationships, less is less.

This year I’ve been thinking about the Akedah story in terms of communication and closeness in relationships. And the implications for closeness and relationship brought about by our tradition’s radical step in conceptualizing human beings as created in the image of the transcendent God, B’Tzelem Elokeem. We are to act towards others as God acts towards us. This is reinforced at the High Holidays by our custom of asking for forgiveness for the slights and hurts we have caused others as the necessary step prior to our own confessions to God and requests for forgiveness.

In this spirit, I’d like you to consider something: what if our relationship with God is reflected in our relationship with other people? What if our relationship with other people is part of our relationship with God? That is, what if these relationships are so deeply intertwined that it is only our language and semantics that make them distinct?

Let me suggest two simple exercises or thought experiments as a way to start to think about getting closer to God. The first was given to me a number of years ago

by a friend. He said when you are listening to music, especially popular music, in your car, on your iPod, wherever, try to hear the words not about human relationships the way they were written, but as if these were brachot to God or messages from God to you.

For example, imagine expressing joy to God through this song popularized by James Taylor :

How sweet it is to be loved by you, I needed the shelter of someone's arms And there you were. I needed someone to understand my ups and downs. And there you were.

Or, consider the idea that God is singing to us when you hear the Bill Withers' song :

Lean on me, when you're not strong  
And I'll be your friend

I'll help you carry on

I think you get the idea. After sundown tonight, turn on your music and try it.

My second suggestion is the opposite idea to the first. What if when we are davening and praying to God, we also are saying things that we want to say to each other but find it difficult to do so?

For ex., we just read before taking out the Torah, a prayer by Nathan Steinhartz, a disciple of Nahman of Bratzlav. The prayer asks God for “shalom ben kall adam la chavero, u'vain ish l'ishto, v'lo yihyeh shoom machloket call bnai mishpati.” “...harmony among all people...between husbands and wives. May there be no discord among members of my family.” The purpose? “Agudah echat l'asot ritzoncha b'laivav shalem.” So that we can be united to do Gd's will w/ a complete heart and not be distracted from this by “problems at home.” Given the family trauma of the Akedah story, such a simple wish for family peace takes on an especially poignant resonance. Is there someone at home or in your family with whom you need to work things out or make peace?

In a central prayer of the Machzor we publicly recite our sins and transgressions to God. Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi. We abuse and betray others, we are cruel, we gossip, we insult. In addition to asking for God's forgiveness, this prayer lets us acknowledge to each other our faults and say that we are sorry for what we have done to hurt each other. Is there a loved one who needs to hear an apology?

In another prayer from Musaf, we thank God for "Nisecha sheb'chal yom imanu, v'al nifliotecha v'tovotecha shebichal ait, erev vavoker, v' zaharaim." For "the miracles of everyday life, for the wonders and gifts that we have all the time, evening and morning and noon. " It is easy for us who are married for many years or with our friends, children and parents to take loved ones for granted. Perhaps this prayer helps us communicate to them just how much of a gift it is to have these special people with us each day. Is there somebody to whom you need to say this?

Let's experiment this year. If we hear our prayers to God, and God's words to us, in the songs around us; if we find our wishes and desires for each other expressed in our prayers to God, then we will be living b'tzelem elokim, we will see how God dwells in each person. We will deepen our intimacy with God and with our loved ones and fellow human beings. We will feel closer to each other and to God. During the upcoming year, I would love to hear how your experiments with songs and prayers go.

Like Abraham and Isaac, we are all on journeys, to unknown destinations of opportunity and challenge; this year, starting now, may we find our way, may we find each other, may we find God, and may we return to ourselves.

Shanah Tovah Umetukah! I wish you a good and sweet year.