

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5783 – Sept. 27, 2022

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Where is Our Ram in the Thicket?

Friends,

Last month, we sent our son, our only son, whom we love, off to college - a bittersweet shehechianu moment that many of you are familiar with. The emotions, I imagine, may not be entirely dissimilar to what Abraham felt as he sheperded Isaac through the wilderness on the way to his education. Abraham brought his child along on a journey accompanied by a bucket full of unarticulated thoughts. He bound Isaac with his [expectations](#), dreams, and fears, and left him at the mercy of his faith – one that Isaac may not have shared. Abraham didn't know what form deliverance would take; he could only trust that validation for his parental actions would manifest itself in due time.

As Abraham stood ready to exercise his convictions, he, like many parents, may not have fully considered or anticipated how the successful realization of his expectations might result in adverse consequences for his family– what Aviva Zornberg calls “the tragic residue” of the Akeidah. Our tradition recognizes a direct causal relationship between the Akeidah and Sara's death - her cries intermingled with those of redemption

in the sound of today's shofar. We, too, must bear with pain the knowledge that the difference between a good outcome and bad outcome for our children may rest on a razor's edge – even more so if we are the ones who, like Abraham, position the razor – the demarcation between success and failure - so precariously.

The tragic residue of the Akeidah includes deep psychological harm to Isaac - a result, some posit, of his seeing his mother's anguish, and also, perhaps, of seeing how his father's faith took him to the razor's edge. Some see this residue lingering enduringly in Isaac's deep anxiety regarding the stability and order of familial relationships and his ultimate blindness. Zornberg cites Rashi to assert that Isaac's entire being is defined by the trauma of the Akeidah. "Imprinted in Isaac's consciousness," she writes, "is the spectacle, wept by angels, of his own death. In old age, the vision explodes in fatal bloom: his awareness of death fills every moment of life." (p. 156-7).

Thus we send our children off into the wilderness - shouldering our hopes, dreams, and expectations for who they might be, binding them to our self-constructed altar of a proper education, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, occupation, future family, the chuppah, and other conceptions of professional and personal success that

somehow validate our actions as parents through time. Abraham, at least, acted upon the directly spoken words of God. Whatever optimism he carried for a successful outcome had an ostensibly tangible foundation. In the absence of such concrete direction, where do we find ours? Where is our ram in the thicket? How do we know it will appear? And in what form?

The hopes, dreams, and expectations we place upon our children's shoulders are one of a number of ways in which we bind them. Another is the geopolitical and sociocultural legacy with which we leave them. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [writes](#) that the fundamental message of the Akeidah is that we do not own our children - "we are merely their guardians on God's behalf." Yet, at the same time as we serve as their guardians, we bind our children to the societal alter that we have collectively built. Every generation must ask itself what kind of guardian it has been. When I was in my late 20's, a good friend once mentioned that she was uncertain whether she wanted to have children. She saw at that time a world into which she feared bringing children. In the early 1990's, that worldview did not resonate for me, but her comment has stayed with me as an internal barometer of sorts that I check in with from time to time.

At the very least, I understand her better now. In my first minyan drash some years ago, I explored, within the context of Parshiot Shemini and Acharei Mot, author Wallace Stegner's metaphoric use the Doppler effect to describe our developmental trajectory as we age - how, like a siren moving toward and away from us, the urgency and energy of youth crescendo toward adulthood, then slowly recede as we age. To assume a worldview like the one my friend espoused is to be on the receding end of the Doppler effect, one where optimism – the sound of the future – the call of the shofar - is waning.

While I still don't subscribe to her underlying apprehension, I do now feel some of its effect gaining traction. Born in 1963, I witnessed the expansion of civil rights, women's rights, worker's rights, reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, patient's rights, and so on. I experienced these developments as nervously exciting, like the rush of a train coming toward me. Now, as we see these rights contracting, some more rapidly than others, I find societal events to be depleting, my own energy and optimism under further pressure by the rise of anti-democratic extremism in our country, and dire projections for our planet's environmental future. Hope seems now more to be a train pulling away from the station, fading rather than advancing. Where are we to find the optimism that

the future will be safe? That the children for whom we are guardians are freed from the alter our generation has built and to which they are bound?

Here again, we recall that Abraham's trust in a positive outcome had a concrete footing in God's directly spoken words. Who here shares such a faith? How do we put the gears into reverse so that the train is once again moving toward us and we are able maintain our resilience - our continuing capacity to recover from setbacks, to move forward productively, ethically, and even joyfully, and to support ourselves, our loved ones, and others in the face of ongoing challenges?

The friend who mentioned her fear of bringing children into the world also revealed some time later that she had been depressed for many years. This is something too that I understand better now, well enough at least to appreciate that depression for some may exert its powers to distort our experience of Stegner's Doppler effect: Events that, under healthier circumstances, might be seen as rushing toward one with urgency and energy are experienced as moving away, the excitement receding rather than advancing. We might imagine that this is how both Sara and Isaac experienced the world in the aftermath of the Akeidah, both of them unable to rejoice in the covenant and

legacy that had been cemented for their family. Sara had already experienced considerable trauma in preceding events. Perhaps her resilience had been eroded irretrievably.

With a father otherwise pre-occupied and a mother in deep depression, Isaac, too, may have lacked necessary reserves. The dynamic seems to have reversed itself at least partially when he first met his beloved Rebekah. [Traditional](#) and [contemporary](#) commentators alike have borrowed from a midrash in Bereisheit Rabbah to describe how Rebekah restored light, blessing, and love back into Isaac's life. We may see the comfort he took from her as marking a reversal of his depression and ability to look to the future with anticipation. Yet, his later blindness and confusion underscore how thin his resilience may have been.

And what about Abraham? Could he, too, have suffered from a lack of strength and resilience that ultimately led to his willingness to sacrifice his child? Undoubtedly, he, like Sara, had experienced substantial earlier traumas. We have previously seen how submissive he could be when he banished his other beloved son. Rabbis Akiba and Nachman of Bratzlav both recognized deep suffering in Abraham's silence as he

accompanied Isaac in the wildness – what Zornberg characterizes as “a howl of loss and loneliness.” (p. 118) Could emotional depletion have eroded his moral courage as it does for some of us, like when an ICU nurse is so burnt out that they cannot speak up when they see a lapse in safety or professional behavior? Most conventional interpretations see Abraham’s actions in the Akeidah as a victory for faith, but some [observers](#) see in Abraham a [failed parent](#) who came precariously close to committing an ethically unconscionable act against their child. Where some may see the power of faith, we might also consider a failure of resilience.

Thus, the positioning of the Akeidah on the second day of RH moves us to meditate on the legacy we leave our children. It is perhaps just such a meditation that absorbed Abraham as he silently led Isaac to the alter. This day in particular compels us to reflect upon the important ways in which we as parents, or citizens of an older generation more broadly, may bind the children of the next generation: through our hopes, dreams, and expectations for them, the state of the world with which we leave them, our emotional maladaptivity and fragility, our lack of resilience, our lack of moral courage. Where Abraham could rely upon God’s directly spoken directive to maintain his optimism for the next generation’s future, we are left with the same silence as Abraham

left with Isaac. We are the ones who are calling: “where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”

The tradition thankfully is not without its answers. If on the first day of Rosh Hashana, we hear the shofar as a coronation, a celebration of the creation of the world, the second day invites us to hear the shofar differently. We are beckoned to hear Sara’s cries, to open our eyes to the pain we have the potential to cause in others. Hearing the shofar today provides us the opportunity to stop, re-set, recalibrate, loosen the binds we have created, to take the knife away from the neck and rededicate ourselves to what is in the best well-being of our loved ones, and recommit to improving the condition for those who will inherit our world.

So perhaps the shofar is our ram in the thicket. Although Abraham had the direct word of God to support his faith, he did not know what form deliverance would take. We at least have a concrete and real understanding that, calamity aside, we will hear the shofar on this day and that, if we let it, it can offer us a measure of deliverance – the existential maternal pain held within the sounds of today’s shofar offers us an annual, jolting opportunity to lift up our eyes, untether the binds, let our loved ones flourish,

and strive to mitigate any damage before it sinks in too enduringly.

The Haftarah, too, also serves as a ram in the thicket for us on this second day of RH. In yesterday's Haftarah, with Hannah, we see the redemptive power of prayer, even in the absence of God's directly spoken word. Those who are able to achieve such a deep level of spirituality, whether in despair or joy, may not need anything more. Today's Haftarah is for the rest of us. It's promise of redemption is a foil to the suffering contained within today's shofar. As parents and family members, it offers comfort that loved ones who have gone seriously astray will return to us:

“Restrain your voice from weeping; your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor....They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future....Your children shall return to your country.” (Jer 31:16).

Perhaps most poignantly, the Haftarah today ends with a parental pledge that stands almost as a direct rebuke to Abraham's actions towards his sons, and an urge of resolve to those of us who, in one form or another, may have bound our loved ones too precariously to the alters we have constructed.

“Truly Ephraim is a dear son to me, a child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, my thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why my heart yearns for him. I will receive him back in love.” (Jer 31:20)

The grand optimism contained within this Haftarah – this ram in the thicket - doesn’t blunt the cries we will hear in today’s shofar. We still need to reckon with that. But it serves to orient us toward the advancing waves of the Doppler effect, where optimism – the sound of the future - is found coming toward us rather than away from us, bringing along all of its energy to embrace as we loosen the ties that may have kept it bound.

Shana Tova!

Additional References

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