

Shanah tovah, everyone.

I'm grateful for the invitation to drash today.

And I recognize that I have big shoes to fill, following as I am in the footsteps of Stu Berman and Roby Blecker.

For my drash I want to talk about the *Akedah*, the story of the binding of Isaac, which we read here yesterday, and which is read in many traditional synagogues on the second day of Rosh Hashana.

The question I want to ask is, Why do we read it?

It is a story that provokes in me a stronger negative reaction than any other in the Torah. Every year it upsets me anew. It may be too much to say that I hate it – but, it is, for me, the quintessential “text of terror,” to use biblical scholar Phyllis Trible's term.

So I want to ask again:

Why do we read the *Akedah* on Rosh Hashanah?

In addition to the hurt and upset I feel at reading the story -- I also, frankly, find myself embarrassed by the *Akedah*, by its prominence:

I think about the infrequent shul goer, the family friend, the power walker on San Juan Blvd who just happens to stop in on R”H, hearing the story of the binding of Isaac. What must they think?

God put Abraham to the test, saying to him, “Abraham.” He answered,

“Here I am.”

“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

They [the shulgoer] are confronted with a story of high drama -- "one of the peaks of ancient narrative," in scholar Robert Alter's words -- but one with mickey mouse theology, primitive morality and flat-out cruelty:

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.

Then a messenger of יהוה called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"

And he answered, "Here I am."

"Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.

For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."

What can a modern person, a morally serious person, find in this tale?

The p'shat reading of the akedah – the surface reading, of the text, is that the binding of Isaac is a test of Abraham's faith, one that he passes.

"The messenger of יהוה called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said,

'By Myself I swear, יהוה declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.'

But if one looks beyond the p'shat, and engages the other voices that have grappled with this text over the generations, some answers start to come into view.

As always, Rashi is a good place to start.

Rashi's commentary notes that, in the Torah, the story of the Akedah is followed immediately by the telling of Sarah's death. Why is this?

It was on learning of the Akedah, Rashi writes, that Sarah's soul fled from her, פָּרְחָה נִשְׁמָתָהּ מִמֶּנָּה , and she died.

In drawing this conclusion, Rashi cites the midrash Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer -- and it is here that I find the beginnings of a persuasive answer for why we might read the Akedah on Rosh Hashana:

Upon hearing of the binding of Isaac, writes the Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer,

“[Sarah] began to weep and to cry aloud three times,

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corresponding to the three sustained notes (of the Shophar), and (she gave forth) three howlings corresponding to the three disconnected short notes (of the Shophar), and her soul fled, and she died.”

It is extremely powerful, and discomfiting, to consider that the wails of the shofar should find their inspiration in the grief of Sarah.

The shofar here shakes us out of the complacency of a passive and uncritical reading; it sensitizes us to Sarah’s pain and transforms the stakes of, and casts a pall over, the Akedah.

It gives us another way into the yearly reading of the text – and suggests to me that the pain the story elicits in me is “a feature, not a bug,” as they say.

When we are sensitized to Sarah’s wails, Sarah’s pain, we are given permission to read the text against the grain.

The recoil we feel at the story becomes a clue – not an anachronism, not a consequence of projecting contemporary morality onto an ancient text –

It encourages us to inquire further: What else was lost, in Abraham’s passing of this test? And what was gained? Was anything?

After all: Abraham’s reward for passing the divine test was nothing new – indeed – it is the same covenant promised him on four other occasions to this point in Genesis.

Which makes it feel kind of like a raw deal.

After the Akedah, the story of Abraham wraps up quickly. Sarah passes away, and then it is Abraham's time only two chapters later.

After the Akedah, Abraham never speaks to God, or is spoken to by God, again.

This is Abraham, whose life is defined by the presence of the Divine, whose relationship with God was once rich and intimate enough to have taken the form of argument, when Avram petitioned God for the lives of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah — (“loving reproof,” to use the words of Rabbi Yose) ...

So it is striking Abraham's life ends without an exit interview from God, without so much as a peep.

Once again, it helps to find Sarah's wails in the blasts of the Shofar.

This prayer by Rabbi Hershel J. Matt, used at the start of the Shofar Service in Machzor Lev Shalem, helps us to hear:

May the cry of the shofar shatter our complacency.

May the cry of the shofar penetrate our souls.

May the cry of the shofar break the bonds of all that enslaves us.

May the cry of the shofar destroy the idols we have placed at the forefront of our lives.

This is a powerful prayer, and I'm struck most of all by that last line, whose language references a well-known midrash about an earlier stage in Abraham's life, from long before the Akedah:

In Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (38:13), Rabbi Hiyya uses the mention of Terach, Avram's father, in Genesis 11:28, to tell us that “Terach was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away somewhere and left Avram to sell them in his place.”

What then follows is a series of tales in which a young, zealous and irreverent Avram, mocks idol-worshippers. And he doesn't spare his father Terach his mockery, or the destruction of his showroom:

“On one of these occasions when Avram was left to mind the store, a woman came in with a plateful of flour and requested him, “Take this and give it to them as an offering.”

So, Avram took a stick and smashed the idols, and put the stick in the hand of the largest.

When his father returned he demanded, “What have you done to them?”

Avram said, “I cannot tell a lie. A woman came with a plateful of fine meal and requested me to offer it to them. One claimed, ‘I must eat first,’ while another claimed, ‘I must eat first.’ Thereupon, the largest arose, took the stick and broke them.”

“Why do you make sport of me? Have they any knowledge?” Terach said.

“Should not your ears hear what your mouth has said?” Avram said.

In this midrash, Abraham shows himself worthy of being monotheism’s emissary in part by undermining his father’s authority.

His hatred of idolatry compels him to defy the patriarchal family structure in which child is expected to be obedient to his father.

By linking these rebellions, the Midrash draws a connection between idolatry and a hierarchy of obedience – one that recalls the “structures of domination and care” described in *The Dawn of Everything* by R’ Graeber and R’ Wengrow, in which “Children were to be submissive to their parents, wives to husbands, and subjects to rulers whose authority came from God [or gods].”

The same connections between idolatry and structures of domination that the midrash points to are there to be found in the story of the *Akedah*.

But this time, an older Abraham is playing a very different role. This time, Abraham is the parent; and Abraham is the idolator.

Describing the actions of Abraham in the binding of Isaac as tantamount to idol worship might seem like a stretch – and within the p’shat reading of the story itself, within Genesis 22, it is.

But to limit our reading to the immediate context is to disregard the cries of Sarah, the call of the shofar.

In the broader context of the Tanakh, Child sacrifice is well understood as a kind of shorthand for pagan idolatry. *Es past nisht*. In the Torah and Prophets, on any number of occasions, heathen kings are condemned for sacrificing their children to Molech and to Baal.

Asked to do the same by God, Abraham does not now object, rebel, or petition. He takes his place in the hierarchy of domination.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel helps us to sharpen the critique further. In *The Sabbath*, Heschel draws a distinction between the realm of space and the realm of time.

He characterizes the realm of space, in Bonna Haberman's words, as "the domain of power, control and acquisition," – about manipulating things and people.

"In the realm of time," by contrast, "the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue, but to be in about."

There are traditions that sanctify space, writes Heschel, describing the structures and subjugations of ancient Rome, and ones that sanctify time. Judaism, Heschel writes, "Is a religion of time."

Abraham concludes his story in the realm of space.

God's messenger stays Abraham's hand in the end, and Isaac's life is of course saved – but if we allow Sarah's cries to guide our reading of the *Akedah*, we begin to gain a greater awareness of all that which was lost, all who were lost, in the story.

We when we attend to the silences in the story, consider who and what is missing, who and what is lost; we can feel ourselves empowered to respond to the texts anew, and renew our traditions; to heal and strengthen bonds of care, partnership, family, community; to better argue with the Divine, and to destroy our idols.

And read in this way, the *Akedah*, like the blast of the shofar itself, can serve to us as a yearly wake-up call.

Shanah tovah