

Drash on the Akedah – 2nd day Rosh Hashanah – October 1, 2008
Gerry Llamado

L'Shana Tovah. When Rabbi Angel invited me to give this drash, I was both honored and intimidated. This is my first Rosh Hashanah as a Jew. I completed my conversion in November 2007, less than one year ago.

My anxiety grew a bit more as I realized that the Torah portion we would read this morning was the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. I have come to understand that this story can be a source of great passion and debate both in our congregation and the broader Jewish community. I worried whether there was something I could add to this discussion. Or if I would accidentally say something that might anger or offend.

Let me begin with a recap of the text. Here is the story of the Akedah as it is traditionally told:

G-d comes to Abraham and says to him, *"Take your son, your only one, the one you love, and go forth to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt-offering, on one of the mountains that I will show you"*.

So Abraham prepares fire wood for the burnt-offering, takes Isaac and two of his servants and they set out for the land of Moriah. After three days of traveling they reach their destination. Abraham goes up the mountain with Isaac leaving the two servants behind. When they arrive at the place that G-d had shown Abraham for the sacrifice, Abraham builds an altar, arranges the fire wood, then binds Isaac and lays him on the altar. Abraham then takes his knife to slay Isaac.

Then out of heaven, an Angel calls to Abraham and stops him from killing his son. At that point Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram with its horns caught in a thicket. And Abraham takes that ram and offers it as a burnt-offering in place of Isaac.

I began my study of this Torah text and the commentaries with the perspective that this was a strange and difficult story: But not one that was core to my identity as a Jew. However, early on I came across a powerful Hasidic commentary attributed to the Lubavitcher Rebbe that grabbed my attention. This commentary teaches that this story bequeaths to us **"the essence of Judaism."** Rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel of the 15th century offers an equally huge assertion:

"In this story lies the entire glory of Israel and their merit before G-d."

I found myself very intrigued by this comment about the 'essence of Judaism.'" I was intrigued because I like to get to the essence of things. I love science, especially astronomy. I am always seeking to deepen my

understanding of the way the world works. At home, my TV station of choice is the Discovery Channel. I was intrigued as well because the question of the essence of Judaism is one I would like to be able to answer. I find that being a recent convert, sometimes I get questions like: What is the main idea of Judaism? Or: What do Jews believe in? Or: What is it about Judaism that made me want to convert?

And in my study of Judaism and thru my experiences here at Sha'ar Zahav, I have tried to come to some initial understanding of the essence of Judaism. And my study led me to not one, but several answers to this question. And by the way, I have learned that having several answers to one question is a pretty common Jewish approach to things.

So before I began my study of this text, if I had been asked "what is the essence of Judaism?" here are the three ways I might have responded.

First, I might have responded with this story from the Talmud. A non-Jew asks Rabbi Hillel to teach him all about the Torah while standing on one foot. Rabbi Hillel said: "What is **hateful to you**, don't do unto **your neighbor**. The rest is commentary."

Second, I might have responded that the essence of Judaism is the idea of Tikkun Olam. That it is our role to do what we can in our own lifetimes to repair the world. And that the messiah will come when we have done our part.

And third, I might have responded that the essence of Judaism is in the Shema, the prayer that first drew me toward the idea of being a Jew. That as Rabbi Angel often teaches us, **there is a unity** that binds and connects the world together.

These answers suggest that the essence of Judaism is about ethics, justice and unity. These are ideas that felt comfortable and understandable to me. But to me, they did not seem terribly connected to the story of Abraham taking his son to the top of Mt. Moriah. So I began to view preparing this drash as a challenge: What could I learn from the story of Abraham and Isaac **about the essence of Judaism**? How can this story strengthen my understanding of what it means to be a Jew? And why is it that we read this story each year at Rosh Hashanah?

So let's return to the text. It seems clear that there are two main characters in this story, Abraham and G-d. And the text reads as if G-d speaks to Abraham with clarity and precision that would be impossible to misunderstand. And here I begin to struggle with the text. I have come to believe in certain conceptions of G-d: -- **some infinite unknowable force**, and **the still small voice within each of us**. **To me**, these seem different from the G-d in **this text**. It would be hard for the G-d I believe in to be a

character in a story. And the G-d in my life does not communicate to me with any kind of clarity – it is perhaps more like a really bad cell phone connection.

I began to imagine: What would this story be like if Abraham's G-d were more like the G-d I have come to believe in? **What if my still, small voice was Abraham's as well?** What if Abraham did not have any more cell phone bars on his connection to G-d than we do today? As I thought about this, I began to see the story in a new way. Here is how I would re-tell the story of this parasha:

Abraham comes to believe that G-d needs for him to make a supreme sacrifice. I am not sure why, but it is not because G-d called down from the heavens or wrote a message in the sky. Abraham has heard **the still small voice** within him. And this is what **he believes** it has told him. But why does Abraham interpret G-d's will for him in this severe way? Perhaps Abraham is feeling guilty about some past aspects of his conduct. Or as some writers suggest, perhaps some terrible calamity has befallen the people, like a famine. And Abraham believes that only his sacrifice can appease G-d and bring relief. This possibility is discussed by the scholar Louis Berman. In his book "The Akedah", Berman writes that in Abraham's time, "*Human sacrifice was a rare and extraordinary ritual evoked by some major crisis: famine, drought, disease, pestilence or war.*" Berman explores this line of thought further, and he writes: "*Abraham faced an agonizing crisis. Perhaps many human lives were at stake. In this context, offering one life to save many lives is an agonized thought but not an impossible one*". Perhaps Abraham thought to himself "*I am so deeply **convinced** this is what I have to do 'it is as if I can hear G-d telling me, 'Yes, Abraham, go ahead and do it.'*"

Abraham believes that he understands what G-d wants of him and that he must comply.

Three days elapse as Abraham and Isaac make the journey to Mount Moriah. The parasha tells us virtually nothing about what occupies Abraham during the journey. In my version, I imagine that the three day journey is filled with meditation and reflection. Abraham's mind wrestles with what he has come to understand as G-d's will – **that he needs to kill his own son.**

I imagine that Abraham prays, not with the words we use today of course, but with his own. And that the walking itself is a form of prayer. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that when he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama, that his "feet were praying." Thus, this physical journey to Mt. Moriah is also a spiritual one. And as Abraham ascends the mountain, I imagine that his spiritual awareness ascends as well.

When he arrives at Mt. Moriah, he begins to occupy himself with getting ready to implement G-d's will. Yet even as he prepares to complete the act,

Abraham's inner wrestling continues. Ultimately, something miraculous happens. But in **my** story **there is no angel. There is only Abraham**, once again guided by his **still small voice**. But it is a voice that is clearer as a result of the journey that he has taken. And here on the mountaintop it helps him come to a new understanding of what G-d wants of him. **Abraham puts down his knife.**

So where does one find the essence of Judaism in this story?

Perhaps, as some have suggested, it is in Abraham's willingness in this story to do that which he thinks G-d requires of him. As he heads off to Mt. Moriah, Abraham demonstrates to us that what G-d wants for us is more important than what we want for ourselves.

Perhaps we find the essence of Judaism in Abraham's faith. As Abraham and Isaac make their way up Mt. Moriah, the parashah describes only one conversation between them. Isaac turns to his father and asks: "**Here is the firestone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt-offering?**" Abraham replies simply: "**G-d will see to the lamb...**".

And Perhaps we find the essence of Judaism in the fact that Isaac's life was spared. This story evokes the title of our High Holiday Prayer book: "*Therefore Choose Life.*" As it is written in Deuteronomy, G-d says: "*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Therefore choose life**, so that you and your descendants may live.*"

I think all of these are important parts of this story. But, what speaks to me most profoundly in this story as **the essence of Judaism** is the **inner journey that Abraham takes**. And the possibility of transformation that it represents. I see the 72 hours of Abraham's journey as a metaphor for what it means to be Jewish. Abraham begins with one understanding of what God demands of him, and he ends with a new understanding -- **a deeper, more profound understanding**. Abraham demonstrates to us that it is possible for us to be able to deepen our understanding of G-d. And to reach a clearer understanding of what G-d wants from us. For myself, I imagine that this is a journey that will take a lifetime. For a people, it is a journey that may take many generations. Abraham opens us up to the possibility that our understanding of G-d can change and evolve. This capacity for change is one of the things I have come to love most about our religion.

And this perspective on the text provides me with new understanding as to why we read it on Rosh Hashanah -- a time when we are intensely focused on our possibilities for personal growth and change.

At the time of my conversion, Rabbi Angel gave me a copy of the book, '*God and the Big Bang*', a text that explores the harmony between science and spirituality.

In it, Daniel Matt discusses the meaning of Halachah, the Jewish way of living, he writes:

"A contemporary halakhah can draw on tradition yet grow and change day by day.... Often, we will not follow a precise route, but create a new one. Listening to conscience, heart and mind, to our needs and the needs of our planet, we integrate these into tradition. We are still "commanded," but the command comes from within."... The holy deed is doing what needs to be done now."

In Matt's view, not only is Halakhah evolving, Torah is evolving as well. Matt reminds us that there are elements of the **natural world** where reality is affected by the process of human observation and study. And he suggests that Torah is like that too. Thru the process of studying Torah we are changed. But the meaning of Torah changes as well. Matt reaches this daring conclusion about Torah : "**The essence**" he writes "**is that there is no essence.**"

This may seem like a scary proposition at first. But I appreciate that our tradition is complex and infinite, much like the universe it seeks to help us understand. And just as our scientific understanding of the world continues to evolve, the Torah teaches us that our spiritual understandings can grow and evolve as well.

For me, the essence of Judaism is that we are all on Abraham's journey.

I hope for all of us that our journey in the new year is a sweet one. And one in which we all take the opportunity to deepen our understanding of what G-d asks of us.

L'Shana Tova