

ROSH HASHANAH DAY
Monday, September 17, 2012

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This is probably the 50th time that I have presided over Rosh Hashanah services, and at least the 50th time that I have read this story from Genesis about the Binding of Isaac.

I would not hazard the guess about how many times you have heard this story, nor would I want think about what you have thought about the story over the years, and about how many different ways you heard the story.

I won't bore you by retelling the experience of Abraham following what he believes God tells him. Suffice it to say that for centuries Jews, Christians and Muslims have been transfixed by the tale itself and the potentiality for multiple meanings. Many Christians still think of the saga of Abraham as a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus.

But Muslims and Jews think of it as another chapter in the life of the founder of Western religions. In fact, Muslims and Jews share a "back story" about Abraham, which does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. It appears in the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, and in the Midrash, a collection of homiletic material and folk tales that embellish the Torah story. Scholars argue about who copied whom. Frankly, it doesn't matter. If anything, it shows how interconnected Jews and Muslims have been through the centuries.

The "back story" is about Abraham in his early years. It seems that Abraham's father Terah was an idol-maker. One day little

Abraham overheard his father ascribe all kinds of magical powers to the idols.

Here is the story: One day Terah had to take a business trip, so he left his son Abraham to manage the shop. People would come in and ask to buy idols. Abraham would ask "How old are you?" The person would answer, "fifty" or "sixty." Abraham would say, "Isn't it pathetic that a man of fifty or sixty wants to bow down to a one-day old idol." The man would be embarrassed, and left the shop.

One day, a woman came with a basket of bread. She asked Abraham to offer it to the gods.

Abraham then took a hammer in his hand, and broke all the idols to pieces, even the biggest idol among them.

When his father returned and saw all the broken idols, he was appalled. "How can I hide anything from you, father. A woman came in and asked me to offer the bread to the idols. Then the idols got into a fight, and the largest one took a hammer and broke all the others to pieces."

"What are you trying to pull off on me," said his father. "Do idols have minds? Can they think?"

Then Abraham replied, " Listen to what you are saying to me!! So why are we worshipping idols?"

For Jews and Muslims, and certainly Christians, the greatest sin was the sin of idolatry.

I. OUR ANCESTORS LIVED IN A BAD NEIGHBORHOOD

The world in which our ancestors lived was a world of idolatry. In biblical times, our ancestors' neighbors were worshipping Baal. Others were worshipping the stars and the sun and the moon. Certainly the Greeks and the Romans were participants in these worship practices as well.

People just did not understand how the world in which they lived works. They were not only seeking answers, but they were eager to change the events to which they were witness.

But the issue of idol worship hit home in many other ways. Even those who asserted that there was but one God, seemed to need to represent God in a simple and straightforward way.

Therefore, the Torah tells us that we are not to worship false Gods, nor are we to make any representations of God. The challenge to our ancestors was great, almost more so in later times. In the seventh century, the early Church faced a similar problem. In the Greek world, people had a strong desire – and perhaps we all have it – to represent God in a very physical way. Islam, in its earliest days, banned any pictorial decoration in its places of worship. Therefore, we see beautiful calligraphy all over mosques, but not images. They follow the tradition of the Torah.

But icons were rampant in the church of the 7th century. The Catholic Church fought a mighty battle with those Christians from the east whose fondness for iconography split the church

along east-west lines. The English term iconoclast is used to describe someone is one who refuses to use icons for worship.

Iconography was also a major factor in the Reformation. Protestants felt that images of God were being confused with God. I will never forget an incident that happened to me many years ago in a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral. As I wandered around the nave, I saw many statues of Jesus and the many saints cherished by Catholics. In front of a statue of Mary, I saw a woman so engrossed in prayer and in her adoration of Mary, I was not sure whether the woman was alive, or just an additional statue reminding Catholics of their special relationship to Mary.

Lest you think that idolization is a Christian problem alone, the great 12th century Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides spent a vast amount of time in his various writings criticizing those who worship idols.

Ultimately, Maimonides reached the conclusion that there is no way in which we can speak positively about God. That language would be idolatrous in itself. So, he concluded that we can only speak of God in negative terms, that is to way, what God is not.

The dangers of idolatry, which so challenged our ancestors, are still with us. There are those who still surround us for whom idolatry is a regular part of their lives.

II. THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

There are no fewer people in the world now who have idolatrous tendencies. Perhaps we need to consider the notion that all human beings have a built-in inclination to idolatrous behavior. I think it manifests itself in different ways among different peoples and groups.

Let us set aside from our consideration people who live in backward societies, who still expect answers to life's most complicated questions from supernatural sources. They live in worlds, which encourage them to follow their most primitive instincts. They seek understanding and solace in ways that are foreign to those who live in sophisticated societies in the first world. They are not those who pose a danger to us.

Nor need we concern ourselves with those whose upbringing has taught them to rely on magical appeals to images of saints and other super human figures. They will always be with us.

There are more insidious dangers lurking everywhere in our lives. So, let me first speak to you about the idolatry of ideas. Panaceas everywhere abound.

Let me give you a startling example. On one of the business news stations, a regular commentator – not a guest – became very frustrated at the darkening economic news from Europe. “You know what we need to do? Send them copies of Ayn Rand’s book *Atlas Shrugged*. Then they will know what to do to

get out of the economic doldrums!" Frankly, I don't know whether he was kidding or not.

One of the idols of the right-wing is Ayn Rand. Who was Ayn Rand? Ayn Rand was a White Russian Jew names Alisa Zinovyeva Rosenbaum who was born in St. Petersburg. Her hatred for Communism was the basis for her abiding antipathy to any sort of social welfare. She was an atheist who rejected any sort of social responsibility on the part of either the government or individual. She was ardent in her support of abortion.

Her promotion of extreme egoism appeals to those who believe in the myth of rugged individualism of the gun-toting wild west. Ayn Rand represents the exact opposite of the essential values of Judaism, in which we believe that egoism is to be sublimated to the larger needs of society.

The worship of Ayn Rand and her antiquated ideas is but one more example of idolatry - the idolatry of ideas.

I suspect that most people are like me. I have tried to read Ayn Rand's books, and gave up in the middle of each try.

We become caught up in an idea, and it takes possession of us. We see this today in the adherents to the Tea Party, in which one idea is the answer to all our problems.

This is idolatrous, really in the same sense that we turn to the moon and the stars to teach us the way to go.

There is another dimension of our idolatrous behavior. This is worship of the past. We see this all over. I am not just talking about luddites who eschew any technological advancement. I

am speaking about people who idealize and idolize the past, for whom new ideas and new ways of doing things and thinking about things is shocking. New ways are beyond consideration. There are too many examples that abound. The early chapters, for example, of the book of Genesis, were early brilliant and insightful attempts to understand the world. But we have other tools of understanding now. It is one thing to admire our early teachers and philosophers. It is something else to refuse to go beyond the ideas of the past, when new knowledge should lead the way.

I will not even mention the Amish or Haredi Jews whose attitudes are exactly the same. New is bad. Change is bad. The old ways are the best.

III. AND THE PEOPLE WE IDOLIZE

We Americans have had a tendency to paint people all black or all white. On the international scene, Fidel Castro became the personification of “all evil.” We ascribed all kinds of heinous motives to him. We refused to deal with him, and we still refuse to really deal with the issues of Cuba and its presence 90 miles from our shores. Much the same can be said about Nikita Khrushchev, and many of the Arab states, whose dictators are no longer alive or in power.

“Black is black” thinking is un-nuanced and ultimately self-defeating.

And so is “white is white” thinking. Once someone achieves success in one thing, that person becomes an authority in all things. We see it all the time in television advertising. A football player endorses a car – for lavish compensation. Why is that football player more knowledgeable than we are?

Moses was a great leader of our people. People believed him and in his ideas. The Book of Exodus tells us an interesting and apt tale of idolatrous behavior. While Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai, the people became restive. They wondered where their leader was, and why was he gone so long.

So they went to Aaron, Moses’s brother and the high priest. They asked Aaron to lead them, and to help them build an altar. Aaron acceded, and instructed the people to bring them all their gold jewelry and precious stones. And they made a golden calf.

When Moses returned with the Ten Commandments, he was horrified at what his people and his brother Aaron had done.

Clearly, Aaron was at fault when the leadership mantle seemed to fall to him, he failed to lead and failed to understand what his role should have been. And the people were at fault too.

Idolatry today, for most of us, presents itself with a different challenge. Do we lose our own sense of judgment, our sense of morality, our sense of right and wrong, just because a success in one area of life crosses over to another area, where he has no competence.

How quickly we are willing to accept magical thinking!
Everything will be all right. So-and-So says so.

CONCLUSION

Abraham our father was the first to counsel us against idolatry. His generation was more concerned with the outside influences on the Jewish people: worship of Baal, worshipers of the sun and the moon and the stars.

Today, the idolatrous challenges we face are more insidious. Do we worship ideas to such an extent that we allow nothing else in our processes of consideration? Are we so committed to one way of thinking, one way of looking at the world, that we become captured in our own narrative.

And today, do we become so taken with American idols, that we suspend all independent judgment. That we take the opinions of people who excel in one area, as the absolute truth in another area?

As we begin this ten-day period of introspection, let us turn our attention to the idolatries in our lives, idolatries which close us off from the future and from independent thought.