

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING  
Thursday, September 25, 2014

I have been reading and preaching on today's Torah portion for more years than I care to think about. The Rosh Hashanah reading of the Binding of Isaac not only appears today, but in the regular cycle of Torah readings throughout the year.

And I always approach this reading with a great deal of ambivalence. Yes, it is a classic Hebrew Bible story, which stars the founder of Judaism Abraham and his son Isaac. Sarah, Abraham's wife, appears in a supporting role, as does the ram, which takes on a supporting role as the sacrifice made in place of Isaac. Yes, the story is an old friend.

Yet the story brings with it many theological problems. First and foremost, what kind of a God is it who asks Abraham to sacrifice his son? Would not an all-knowing God have the answer already? Why did Abraham keep this terrible challenge to himself? Why didn't he tell Sarah, his wife?

My friend, the feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible wrote about this almost 25 years ago. She calls her article "The Sacrifice of Sarah."

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, more than 150 years ago, wrote about the fear that Abraham must have felt when God asked him to sacrifice his son. He called his essay "In Fear and Trembling," probably taking his title from a phrase in the book of Psalms.

Fear, in fact, is a large part of life. Dr. Richard Friedman, a psychiatrist at Weill Cornell Medical School wrote about fear in

a fascinating article in the New York Times in June of this year. Talking about the structure of the brain, he identified the amygdala as the center of fear in the brain, and the pre-frontal cortex, which brings rationality to the fear, as having the effect of tempering that fear.

Rabbi Nachman of Baslov wrote, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kol Haolam kulo gesher zar m'od. V'haikar lo 'fached kulo. The whole world is a very narrow bridge; the important thing is not to be afraid.

Yes, indeed. The world in which we live is a precarious place. We never know what will happen tomorrow or the day after.

## I. FEAR IN OUR LIVES

There are many anxieties that people feel. These anxieties are normal for all of us. There are many times when we feel out of control, that things are happening to us in a random way that we cannot understand.

The desire to control our world is a natural and understandable phenomenon. But sometimes fear, which comes from anxiety and uncertainty, is out of balance with our rational selves.

For example, people are killed in pedestrian accidents fairly frequently, especially in a busy city like New York. We know that we need to balance this fear of being hit by a car with the low incidence of it actually happening. When the fear is out of balance with the reality, then we have a problem.

One of our greatest fears concerns death. First, we have no idea when it will happen to us. It can come as a result of an accident, or worse, by a sudden illness. And then, we have no idea of what happens after we die.

Of course, there are no reports from the world beyond death. Yet many of us believe that there is no actual world beyond death, and this world is what we make of it. There is no reward or punishment awaiting beyond.

This idea is disappointing to some, for they would like to believe that their good works on earth will somehow be appreciated and rewarded in the world to come. Others would like to believe that their enemies will be punished in full measure.

Woody Allen, in his new film “Magic in the Moonlight” confronts this issue clearly. A magician, played by Colin Firth, is asked to explain the success of a young woman medium in communicating with people who have died. He does explain the phenomenon. I won’t tell you the answer, in case you have not seen the movie.

These ideas of reward and punishment were at the heart of the theology of the Middle Ages. This was a time when enormous imaginary structures were constructed for people to live out their desires for justice, true justice. Notions of reward and punishment ruled the day.

The idea of “good for good’s own sake” seemed to have little following in this time. The folk worlds of Dante Alighieri carried enormous power among ordinary people, and even among the leaders of the Catholic Church at that time.

## II. THE WORLDS OF MAGIC AND SUPERSTITION

Most of the ancient religions of this world had clear ideas of what happens to us after death. These ideas were largely based on fear.

The ancient Egyptians had their notion of a full and complete life in the next world. Pharaohs filled their burial chambers, the pyramids, with all kinds of household paraphernalia as well as jewels to accompany them to their next life.

Folk religion in every part of the world has taken advantage of this widespread fear of the unknown beyond death. Practitioners of magic were able to connect with this visceral fear that all of us share.

They invented rituals, which must be performed in a very special way to be effective. The times were precise, and the manner of performance must be followed exactly.

The rituals, described in the book of Leviticus, are a prime example in our Jewish tradition. While we Jews have moved very far away from these ancient Temple formulations, in ancient days the construction of the Temple ritual was detailed in every way possible. The blood must be splattered on the Temple altar in a certain way, and the incense offered according to a set pattern.

Jewish worship now relies less on magical processes than did our ancestors, but many Christian churches – Roman Catholic and Episcopalian to name two – still adhere to the notion that the precise performance of the ritual is necessary for its acceptance by God.

(Lest you think that there are no Jews who are affected by the importance of this sort of OCD behavior, let me enlighten you. Several years ago, when I was a rabbi in the Twin Cities, I was one of the leaders of a Jewish Federation trip to Israel. We flew from Minneapolis-St. Paul to JFK for our El Al flight. As the El Al 747 plane was roaring down the runway, it sustained a flat tire. It was necessary to postpone the flight till the next day. We were put up at a seedy hotel at Kennedy Airport. We were instructed to be in the lobby ready to leave early the next morning. While we were waiting for the bus, several of the passengers were laying t'fillin in the lobby. Wandering among these people was a self-appointed monitor, a Jew in frock coat and streimel. He moved from person to person adjusting their t'fillin straps so that they lay on the worshiper's arm in a pattern that satisfied his OCD needs.)

Relieving one's anxiety about death and the afterlife can be resolved by precise performance of ritual, be it Christian or Jewish.

### III. SO WHAT CAN WE BELIEVE?

There is a recurring Jewish image, which is most apparent at this time of the year. It is the poetic notion of a Book of Life, in which God writes each person's fate for the following year. For modernist, it would be a computer program rather than a large ledger book.

This image is repeated in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which we read this morning and will repeat again on Yom Kippur. We are to be counted under the shepherd's staff. "Who shall live? And who shall die?"

These are beautiful folk images, designed to help us understand the fragility of life. But there is no notion whatever that performing the worship service in a special way will so appease God; that we will live the next year. Or die next year.

Jewish thinking has evolved considerably over the past several hundred years, and while we do retain some of the old poetic images of the past, it is more out of nostalgia than belief.

The essence of Jewish theology teaches that each of us has responsibility for ourselves, and no one is going to bail us out. Our notion of God moves beyond "the Big Daddy" in the sky.

My friends, this is not some new thought conjured up by contemporary Reform Jewish scholars living in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The basis for this approach was Aristotle, brought to the Jewish people by Maimonides, who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Spain. He emphasized in incorporeality of God, in contrast to the Hallmark Card artist who pictures God hovering over two large journals, one with the legend Life, and the other Death.

These sophisticated Jewish ideas were advanced by Baruch Spinoza in Amsterdam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, Spinoza is now credited by contemporary scholars as being one of the influences on the thinking, which led to the French Enlightenment.

This line of thinking was advanced, in our own day, by Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement. His influence both on the Conservative Movement and the Reform Movement, as well as Reconstructionist Judaism, has been widespread and deep.

So, it is only in shtetl thinking that God is conceived in these super human primitive terms.



## CONCLUSION

Rabbi Nachman of Braslov's image of life as a narrow bridge rings true. Danger lurks on every side. We do not know the future, and all our attempts at control ultimately fail.

But he goes on to say that it is fear, which is the ultimate danger. We must activate the pre-frontal cortex, so that it transcends the anxieties of the amygdala.

The logic of the pre-frontal cortex tells us that the ultimate test of our humanity is our behavior toward our fellow human beings. We need not fear the afterlife or its vaunted punishments to validate good behavior.

What is the line from the beer commercial, "You only go around once"? I think the writers of the ad meant that you should enjoy yourself, and drink their beer. It'll be the only chance you have.

But going around once for me is that we have but one chance to leave this earth as a decent, thoughtful human being.

And this is what our High Holy Days are all about.

YOU NEED ONE MORE SENTENCE HERE. MAYBE *ken y'hi ratzon*, or some such?